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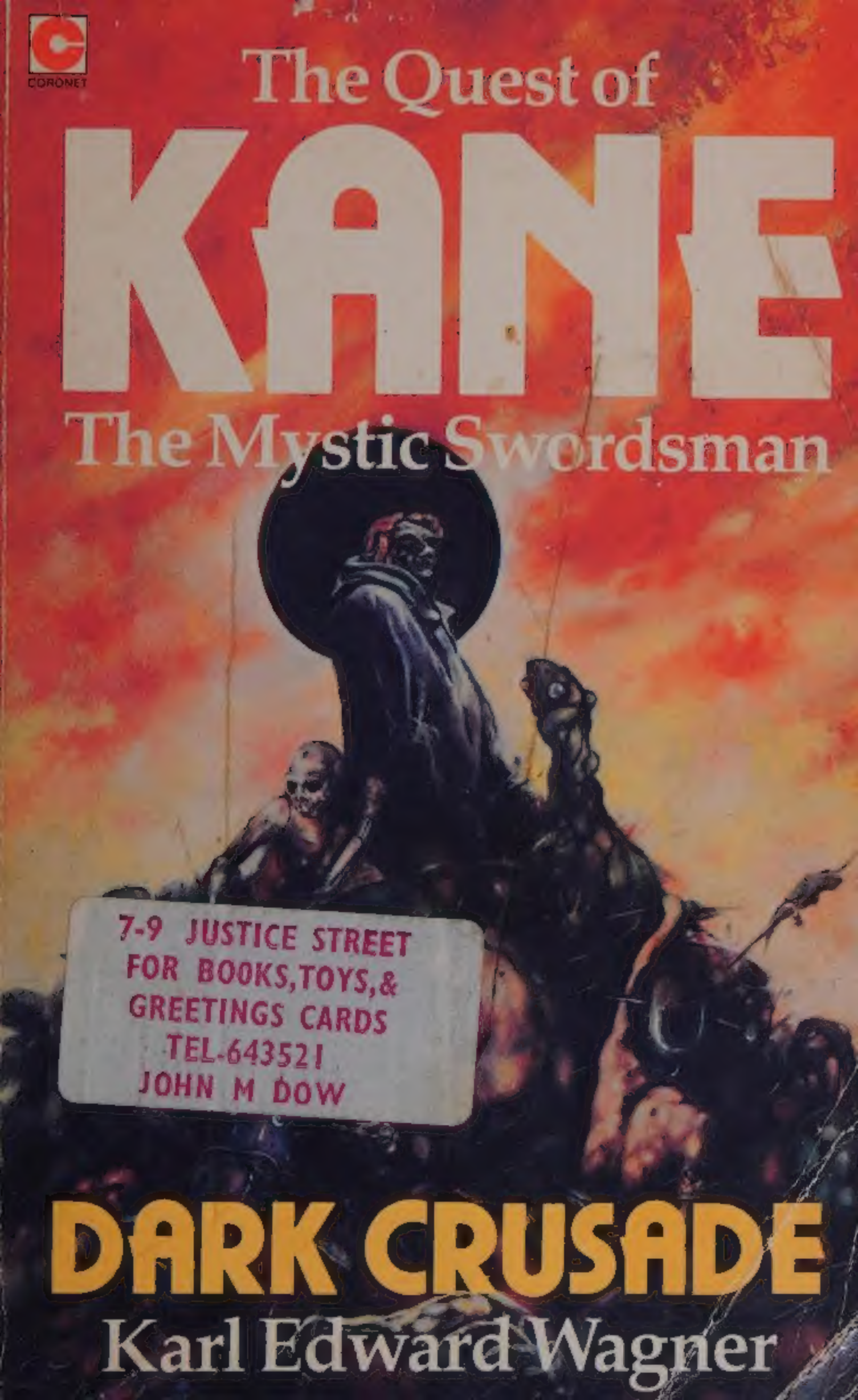

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To Bob Herford–

So, we'll go no more aroving
So late into the night . . .

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And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

William Blake, *London*

Prologue

"There's no refuge there."

"What?"

The hunted man spun about, warily studied the shadows. There, in the dark corner of the buttress, a black-robed figure he had not noticed a moment before—when on failing legs he staggered toward the shadowed walls of the ancient tower. From the darkened streets down which he fled came shouts and clamour of armed pursuit. In the black silence beneath the tower, there was only the hoarse rush of his breath and the soft splat of blood as it dripped from his arm. His sword raised clumsily in the direction of the voice.

"There's no refuge for you there," repeated the black-robed figure. "Not in the Lair of Yslsl."

A bony hand snaked from the shadowy robe and gestured toward the black stone tower that rose into the starless night. The wounded swordsman followed the gesture, gazed upward at the dark mass of the abandoned tower. It was older than the city of Ingoldi, men said. Older even than the fortress, Ceddi, whose weathered

fortifications had once incorporated the black tower. Abandoned now, the ancient tower was the subject of countless foreboding legends. But tonight guardsmen with torches and ready blades made the yawning doorway and its cobwebbed spiral stairs a welcome shelter.

"What do you know, old man!" growled the hunted man.

"Only that the guardsmen who followed your blood-trail will not hesitate to search the tower. There's no escape for you in the Lair of Yslsl, and brave Orted will make this final stand with only bats and spiders to shield his back."

The swordsman squared his bull-like shoulders. "So you know me, old man."

"All across Shapeli men know the fame of Orted. And all Ingoldi is talking of the trap that closed upon you and your wolves today, as you dared enter the city to plunder the Guild Fair."

The bandit laughed bitterly. "Not a one of the common folk of Shapeli would raise a hand against us—and one of my own men betrayed me."

He stepped closer to the black-robed figure. "And I know you, old man—a priest of Sataki by your black cassock and gold medallion. I thought the Satakis stayed in the dusty halls of Ceddi, shut away from the common world."

"We haven't forgotten the world beyond Ceddi," returned the priest. "Nor are we friends of those who oppress the poor to build up worldly treasures."

There was surprising strength in the gnarled fingers that tugged at his bloody sleeve. "Come. We'll give you shelter in Ceddi."

"Is this another trap? I warn you—you'll not live to spend the bounty you seek!"

"Don't be a fool. I could have given the alarm already if I desired your death. Come. They are almost upon us. There's a way past the wall close by here."

With nothing to lose, Orted yielded to the pull on his sleeve. The priest withdrew through the shadows of the tower, leading across the rubble-strewn court toward

a ruined wall. A paving stone pivoted downward at the angle of the wall, and steps led downward still. The priest descended confidently. Ill at ease, the bandit leader followed. Very little was known of the Satakis, but such rumors as there were of the ancient cult were not pleasant ones. Still, the torches were very close, and the arrows in his shoulder and side were leeching away his strength.

As he entered the gloomy passageway within, the entrance silently swung shut. Orted turned to see whose hand had closed it. He sensed the priest's quick movement behind him.

Then nothing at all.

Sensation returned after a space. The back of his skull ached. Cold stone pressed against his bare flesh. His limbs were outstretched, immobile. He opened his eyes.

Above him floated a naked man, spread-eagled in the blackness.

Orted shook his head, fighting pain and vertigo. His vision cleared. He looked into a black mirror, high on the ceiling above him. The naked man was himself.

He was spread-eagled across a circle of black stone, pinioned by thongs about his wrists and ankles. His limbs lay along grooves cut into the stone, and in the mirror he recognized the ring of glyphs carved into the perimeter. It was the same as on the gold medallion the priest had worn—the avellan cross with its circle of elder glyphs.

But he was on the cross, and this was the altar of Sataki.

Orted growled a curse and strained at his bonds. Even had he not been wounded it would have been useless.

The black-robed figures circled about the altar looked down at him, faces expressionless blurs in the shadow of their cowls.

Orted raged at them. "Where are you, you pox-eaten whoreson liar! Is this the refuge you promised! Why didn't you leave me to face the guardsmen—that would have been a clean death!"

"It would have been a useless death," sneered the

familiar voice. "Sacrifices are rare to find in these dismal times, and my brothers too few, too old. It has been months since we last were able to lure into Ceddi some fool whose disappearance would not be noticed. For all your life of villainy and plunder, bold Orted, your final act will be one of service. Not in many years have we offered to Sataki a soul as strong as yours!"

They ignored his curses as they began their evocation. The bandit howled in rage, writhed against his bonds—but his cries could break their low-voiced chant no more than his sweat-soaked limbs could snap their fetters. Orted, a man who had no gods, called out to Thoem, to Vaul, to such other gods whose names he knew. When they ignored him, the outlaw beseeched the aid of Thro'-ellet the Seven-Eyed, of Lord Tloluvin, or Sathonys, and others of the demonlords whose names are not good to speak. If they listened, they were not moved.

"Our god is far older than those to whom you plead in vain!" came a mocking whisper from the priest who painted the sigil of Sataki across the bandit's chest with a brush wetted from his flowing wounds.

Bittersweet incense clouded the air, its narcotic fumes dulling his senses, soothing his frantic struggle to break free. Their droning chant, unintelligible to his ears, grew vague and distant. In the black mirror overhead, his reflection became clouded . . .

No. From the mirror above him a black fog was taking form, blotting out his reflection in a shroud of nebulous substance.

Orted screamed then—arching his body away from the altar, heedless of the trivial pain of his wounds.

Something was being torn from him . . .

The circle of priests ceased their chant, drew back in anticipation . . .

But that which they anticipated did not occur—and not even the hoariest annals of their ancient cult gave warning of that which did.

A thousand misty tendrils streamed down from the circle of black glass high above. Like spiderwebs of jet, they spun down to enfold the contorted figure on the

altar. And on the tendrils of shadow, the half-glimpsed shadow of *something* crept down to engulf the stricken man. Altar and sacrifice were totally obliterated in a writhing mass of darkness.

Those of the onlookers who had not fled or died from fear could not guess how long the shadow clung there. Huddled in supplication they buried their faces in their robes. As there are names it is not wise to utter, there are visions it is not well to see.

And after a period of dread a voice commanded them: "Rise and stand before me!"

Lifting terror-stricken faces, the priests of Sataki beheld a wonder beyond comprehension.

The Man Who Cast No Shadow

The Guild Fair at Ingoldi was in its third day. Located centrally to the trade routes that crossed this region of tropical forest, the city was an ideal setting for the annual event. From across Shapeli craftsmen journeyed to display their work to the speculative eyes of merchants and traders of the forestland and beyond—wind-burned sailors whose merchant ships plied the Inland Sea to the west, dark-tanned horsemen whose caravans crossed the grassy plains of the southern kingdoms where the forestland turned to savannah on Shapeli's southern border. Even for those who were neither craftsman nor merchant, the Guild Fair was a grand event—a holiday from an existence of bucolic drudgery. From innumerable towns and settlements, those who were able to make the journey travelled to Ingoldi for a week of carnival.

In stalls and pavilions, from wagons and hastily thrown up awnings, all across Guild Square and overflowing along the streets that entered the square, buyer and seller hawked and haggled for the products of the forest. Rich fur pelts and leatherwork, finely woven cloth of cotton

and linen. Sturdy chests of tropical hardwood to hold your purchases safe against your travel, or a delicate comb of ebony and adder skin to grace your lady's hair. Tablewares of tin and copper, pottery and blown glass, wooden trenchers and silver plates. Exquisite jewellery of silver and gold, emerald and opal—and to guard it, hardwood bows and iron-barbed arrows, knives and swords whose blades are of true Carsultyal steel—by Thoem, I swear it!

Taverns and impromptu wineshops served the thirsty crowd with ale and wine, brandy and more curious spirits. Street vendors hawked fresh fruits and produce, or spicy stews and kabobs, cooked before your eyes on charcoal braziers. Beneath the tolerant eyes of the city guard, cutpurses and con men roved through the throng in search of prey. Enterprising whores with harsh laughter and automatic smiles sought to lure tradesmen from the business of the day. Acrobats, mimes, and street singers added their frantic distractions to the milling crowds.

The Guild Fair was an imbroglio of gaudy colors, exotic smells, strident sounds and jostled bodies. All Ingoldi was engulfed in the festival atmosphere, and the abortive attempt of Orted and his outlaw pack to raid the Guild Fair the day before was already a topic of outworn interest.

To Captain Fordheir, who commanded the city guard, the matter was still of pressing interest. Fordheir it was whose archers had yesterday made a bloody shambles of Orted's carefully planned raid. Tempted by the bounty on the famous outlaw's head, one of his band had earlier revealed Orted's well-laid plans to the captain of the guard.

Ingoldi was an indolent, sprawling city—after centuries of peace, its walls outgrown and dismantled for building stone. With the Guild Fair at height, an incalculable fortune in coin and costly, readily transportable wares was concentrated here—with only an undermanned city guard to protect it. It was a daring scheme, but the common folk applauded the bold outlaw and would not

rally behind the mercenary guard or the rich merchants. Why face outlaw steel to protect gold that could never be yours?

Orted thought to have a hundred of his men intermingled with the throng as he rode into Guild Square. The informer's eye had been keen as an adder's fang, and less than half remained untaken when Orted and the rest of his band charged down narrow Trade Street. Suddenly guildsmen's wagons were barricades, and overhanging shops housed archers. It was quick slaughter for all but a few.

To Fordheir's chagrin, Orted himself had thus far eluded him. When the trap closed, Fordheir saw the bandit leader, already hit twice, crash his horse through the lattice window of a shop. Somehow the wounded outlaw cut his way past the archers within, then bolted down the twisting maze of alleys and hidden courtyards beyond—losing himself in the confusion of mob panic. They hunted him throughout the afternoon and evening, but withal Orted somehow won free.

Fordheir scowled as he remembered how the blood-trail inexplicably vanished near the ancient walls of Ceddi. The outlaw had almost been in his grasp there, and someone had helped him. His men perhaps, in which case Orted doubtless was far from Ingoldi—or possibly someone in the city now sheltered him.

Fordheir had long pondered the inconsistency of the outlaw's popularity. Orted was a hero to the common folks—a daring rogue who only stole from their masters. Fordheir snorted at the conceit—what profit was there in robbing from the poor? Besides, he knew enough of the outlaw to be aware of the ruthless, less picaresque side of his depredations.

Captain Fordheir, on the other hand, and the city guard were only despised mercenaries—hired by the merchants and the aristocracy to maintain such order as there was in Ingoldi. For pittance pay that necessitated bribe-taking to maintain one's person and equipage, the city guard kept the citizens of Ingoldi reasonably safe from each other. The populace held them in scorn, and

the gentry loudly demanded to know how Orted had managed to escape. It was, reflected Fordheir, his blond hair thinning and his joints stiff with age, enough to make him yearn for the days of his youth and the interminable border wars of the southern kingdoms. But an aging mercenary has to eke out his years as best he can.

Wearily he stretched in his saddle, wriggling his toes in the cramped boots. He and twenty mounted guardsmen slowly made their way into the city after some hours of fruitless search along the outskirts of Ingoldi. Emerging from the forest, the city's nondescript skyline of pointed roofs, crooked chimneys, and domed mansions of the wealthy was a welcome sight. The dark walls of Ceddi made the gloomy fortress a thing apart from carnival Ingoldi.

It had been a sleepless night, a long afternoon. Fordheir's tired joints ached, his belly was sour, his temper frayed. Grudgingly he admitted to himself that he had let the outlaw leader slip through his hands. Well, a good meal, a pitcher of ale, and his cot at the barracks would improve matters somewhat.

A horseman approached them at gallop. By his dark green shirt and trousers, a stripe of red along the leg, Fordheir recognized the rider as one of his men. He wondered what the guardsman's haste might bode.

The rider was out of breath as he drew rein. "Lieutenant Anchara ordered me to find you, sir. A group of Satakis are haranguing the crowd. He's afraid there might be trouble."

Fordheir swore. "If those damn pinch-faced priests don't have sense enough to stay hidden in their stone-pile during Guild Fair, it's none of our lookout if the crowd tears them to pieces!"

"It's not that," the guardsman said with a trace of worry. "Lieutenant Anchara thinks they've got the crowd behind them."

"Thoem's balls! One day it's bandits, the next a bunch of crap-headed fanatics! Does Anchara really think we need to bust them up? He's got men there—why doesn't he use them!"

"I couldn't say, sir. But something's definitely in the air. Lieutenant Anchara thinks he saw some of Orted's men in the ranks about the priests."

"Lieutenant Anchara thinks! Why doesn't he ask Tapper if they're Orted's men! That's what we're paying the little snake for!"

"The informer has disappeared, sir." The guardsman's tone was unhappy.

Fordheir spat in disgust. "On the double, then. Let's see what kind of fool's errand this is!"

As he led his men through the streets to Guild Square, Fordheir tried to make sense of this latest disturbance. So far as he knew, the Satakis generally kept to their crumbling citadel and left the outside world alone. From time to time the disappearance of a street child or drunken beggar was whispered to be the work of the Satakis, but no one had ever been concerned enough to inquire within the fortress.

Tradition had it that their cult worshipped some elder world demon, and that Ceddi (which was said to mean "the Altar") had been raised on the stones of a still older fortress, of which the Tower of Yslsl was a survival. The cult was an ancient one, certainly; at present all but passed into extinction. Religious fanaticism had burned out some centuries previous when the Dualist heresy had fanned the flames that brought down the vast Serranthonian Empire. Today those of the Great Northern Continent who felt obliged to follow a god commonly worshipped Thoem or Vaul, or some combination thereof, and Sataki and Yslsl were names alien to any known pantheon. The seldom seen black-robed priests were held in some distrust by the populace, and few cared to venture close to Ceddi after twilight. While almost nothing was known about the cult, there were certain rumors and conjectures of an unpleasant sort.

Guild Square was as crowded as Fordheir could remember having seen it. Over a hundred yards across, the vast paved square was jammed to the point where walking was a labor. There was an atmosphere of suppressed energy, of building excitement about the crowd. Forcing

passage to where Lieutenant Anchara waited with another contingent of the guard, Fordheir decided he didn't like the feel of it. Too many heads were turned from the business of the Fair, intent on the small group of black-robed priests who had appropriated a stage platform near the center. This far away, Fordheir could not hear their words—but the murmurs of the crowd were not reassuring.

His lieutenant gave him a nervous grin as he drew rein. "Hope I didn't cause you to break off anything important . . ."

Fordheir shook his blond head. "You didn't." Anchara had served under him in the old days in the southern kingdoms. Fordheir respected the man's judgment, and now to his mind as well there came a sense of danger.

"How long has this been going on?"

"About an hour ago I noticed that a bunch of them had climbed up on one of the stages, started their damn preaching. Few people tried to shout them down, but if you look close you'll see they've got some damn ugly-looking bastards cordoned around the stage. There were a few scuffles, nothing much, and I was wondering how to handle it or if I need bother, when I came to notice a few faces in the cordon. Damn Tapper demanded his money and lit out like all hell was after him, so I couldn't be sure—but I'd swear that tall bastard with the ear-rings there is one Tapper fingered and gave us the slip."

Fordheir studied the cordon of thuggish guards. Their dirty and ill-sorted garments had one thing in common—each wore a broad armband of red cloth, on which was emblazoned in black ink an "X" within a circle. Fordheir vaguely recalled that this was the sigil of Sataki.

"You're right," he said. "It is a tough-looking gang to be playing watchdog for a bunch of crazy-assed priests. Wonder where they got the money to hire them?"

"I'd swear they're some of Orted's men."

"We could check it. How long have people been listening to them?"

"Well, like I said, at first there was some catcalls and

that was silenced pretty quick. Then people close by started looking to see what the row was all about. And some drifted away, but more stayed, and the crowd just kept building up as more and more folks come over to see what everybody else was listening to. They've about got the square jammed solid, and nobody can get to the stalls or anything."

"Then we'd better bust this up," Fordheir decided, remembering who paid his wages.

The harangue of the black-robed priests had been working to a crescendo. At this distance Fordheir could catch only a little of what they said. Oft-repeated was the word "prophet" and certain phrases: "a new age," "a world reborn in darkness," "a prophet sent from Sataki," "he who will lead us." Fordheir's eye was drawn to the tall priest who stood in their midst—silent, motionless—enswathed in a great hooded cape of black silk, on which the sigil of Sataki was emblazoned so that its band of glyphs fell like a scarlet circle about his torso, and the avellan cross rose over his chest and back so that his head was the center of its "X." The words and gestures of the other priests more and more were directed toward their silent brother. Highly charged with excitement, the attention of the crowd focused on this enigmatic figure.

Suddenly the impassioned harangue of the priests broke off. Fordheir heard their cry: "Behold! The Prophet from the Altar!"

With a dramatic flourish, the silent priest flung off his cape.

Anchara gasped and pointed. "Thoem! Do you see that!"

Fordheir saw. Everyone saw.

With the majesty of a demigod, Orted stood before them. The leonine head with its mass of brown hair and clean-shaven features was unmistakable—albeit more carefully groomed than was his wont. Arms akimbo, clad in close-fitting trousers and blouse-sleeved shirt of black silk, he loomed larger than life. The gold sigil of Sataki hung over his broad chest, flashing in the late afternoon

sun. His glowing black eyes passed over the many hundreds of faces before him, seeming to meet each man's gaze.

He cast no shadow.

"Block off every street out of the square," Fordheir ordered. "And send a rider to the barracks for every available man. I don't understand this, but Orted's no fool."

Grimly he contemplated forcing a wedge through the packed square. "Bring up archers," he went on. "We can't risk his escaping into the mob."

"Sir." Anchara's voice was uneasy. "He doesn't seem to cast a shadow."

"I know."

Guild Square grew quiet after the initial hubbub of surprise as the crowd recognized the outlaw leader. The carnival air was overshadowed with an atmosphere of wonder and expectation. In the hush Orted began to speak in measured tone, his resonant voice ringing clearly.

"I am the man who once was Orted, called bandit and outlaw by other men. I am that man no longer. A god has entered into me, and his will is my will, my words are his words. Listen to me, for I am Orted Ak-Ceddi, the Prophet of Sataki!

"The World of Light is doomed, and the Gods of Light shall perish with it, and the Children of Light shall be utterly consumed in their fall. Before Light there was Darkness, before Order there was Chaos. Light and Order are fragile abnormalities in the natural state of the Cosmos. They cannot long endure. The Gods of Darkness and Chaos are far older and vastly more powerful. Against their wisdom and strength the usurper gods must fail.

"The wars they wage are beyond human comprehension, but the time is close at hand when the victor shall conquer, and the defeated shall be destroyed. The day is close upon us when our world shall be utterly swallowed in darkness, when man's futile gods shall be destroyed, and with them their temples and the fools who seek shelter therein."

Evening shadows were closing over the square, giving dramatic emphasis to the sombre words of the man who

cast no shadow. Fordheir could taste the aura of fear that claimed the awestricken listeners. The man's voice was hypnotic, compelling. Fordheir felt a sense of hopelessness creep through his thoughts.

"There is but one hope of salvation."

The tightly packed crowd waited in utter silence.

"The Children of Light shall perish with their gods—but the Gods of Darkness shall preserve all those who honor them. Our world shall be reborn in Darkness, and there shall be a rebirth for all who have pledged their souls to Darkness. For the Children of Darkness there shall be a new age, and they shall share in the spoils of victory. They shall know the pure freedom of Chaos, and they shall themselves live as gods. No pleasure shall be denied them, no longing shall pass unfulfilled. Vanquished gods shall be their slaves, fallen goddesses their concubines, and the Children of Light shall be as dirt beneath the feet of the Children of Darkness!"

Exultant shouts began to echo across the square.

Orted Ak-Ceddi waited for the excited cries to swell, then raised his arms for silence.

"Sataki, greatest of the Gods of Darkness, has entered into me, and he bids me tell you this: That he, Sataki, who has all but been forgotten by mankind, has not forgotten mankind. That he, Sataki, has forgiven mankind his negligence, for he understands that mankind has too long been misled by false gods. That he, Sataki, has determined that mankind shall be led forth from his ignorance, so that many thousands shall share in the triumph of Darkness. That he, Sataki, has chosen me, Orted Ak-Ceddi, to be his Prophet, and to lead mankind into the new age!"

"The men are in position, sir," Anchara whispered, reining nervously alongside. "The streets are cordoned, but if the mob turns on us . . ."

Fordheir felt his belly tighten. "I don't pretend to understand this," he stated grimly. "But I understand our duty. Have the archers prepared to fire on command. If we can conclude this cleanly, we will. But we will conclude this."

Orted Ak-Ceddi again raised his arms for silence.

"Sataki bids me tell you further: That it is his command that all mankind shall honor his name and his altar. The day of final victory is near, and Sataki commands that the Children of Light shall be destroyed by the Children of Darkness, even as the Gods of Light and Order are vanquished by the Gods of Darkness and Chaos.

"Therefore, this is Sataki's will: That each man must choose—Sataki or death! To all men who honor his name, Sataki gives the riches and pleasures of this world, and the promise of eternal majesty in the new age to come! To all men who refuse to honor his name, Sataki gives naught but death in this world, and eternal degradation in the new age to come! Their goods and their wealth shall be forfeit to Sataki, and all his followers shall share equally in that bounty! And the only law shall be: Serve Sataki and do as you desire! And the only command shall be: Serve Sataki or die!"

The crowd was in a rage—fights erupting throughout the square as reactions differed to the Prophet's impassioned oratory. Matters were getting out of hand, Fordheir decided, abandoning hope for a quiet arrest of the outlaw-turned-zealot. He gave a command to the archers, who had moved in as close as the press allowed.

A rush of arrows streaked past the stage, to the peril of those standing close by. Half a dozen shafts struck Orted Ak-Ceddi. His powerful body staggered under their impact, as their iron barbs glanced off his torso. Screams and angry shouts rose from the crowd. The Prophet held his feet.

"He wears good mail beneath his clothing," marvelled Anchara.

"Would you slay me, fools!" bellowed the Prophet. Abruptly he ripped the arrow-torn shirt from his chest. "Steel cannot pierce the flesh Sataki has touched!"

Orted Ak-Ceddi wore no mail. His bare flesh was unmarked by any wound, old or recent.

"More sorcery!" Anchara breathed. "Steel cannot fight sorcery!"

"We'll damn well know for sure!" Fordheir growled. "Prepare to move forward."

The archers had hesitated, stunned by what they witnessed.

Orted's shout carried over the tumult of the crowd. He raised his arms triumphantly. "See how Sataki protects his Prophet! So shall Sataki protect and reward all who serve him! Choose now—Sataki or death! Will you serve Sataki!"

"Sataki!" roared the crowd.

"Sataki!" the Prophet shouted back.

"*Sataki!*" the roar was louder—and louder into a chant.

"Then to the unbelievers, death!" Orted commanded against the roar. He pointed to the archers. "*Death!*"

"*Death!*" chanted the crowd.

Seeing their danger, the archers tried to withdraw to the main body of the guard. Too late. The press was too close, as the mob turned on them, hurling stones and clubs. The archers fired pointblank into the enraged mass of bodies.

There were many targets, but an archer can draw and loose only so fast, and thus . . .

Fordheir drew his long sabre, turning sick at the sudden wave of slaughter. Violence claimed the massed square in countless individual struggles. The first stalls and pavilions were surged over by the looting mob. From his platform, Orted Ak-Ceddi exulted them on.

"Can we break them?" Lieutenant Anchara wondered.

Less than a hundred horsemen against a blood-mad mob? Captain Fordheir knew that ordinarily the odds would favor him. This time?

"Draw sabres," he ordered. "Forward to clear the square."

The guard pushed forward, horses at a walk, against the rioting thousands. The failing sunlight touched their grim faces and razor-honed sabres. Angry faces snarled up at their approach.

"Disperse! Clear the square!"

The mob wavered, pushing back into its already packed

ranks to avoid the menace of hooves and steel. A few looters began to break for the alleys.

Then a clarion command. *"For Sataki! Strike and kill!"*

"Sataki!" the mob echoed. *"Death!"*

Stones and clubs began to fly, and a sprinkle of arrows. Knives and weapons sprang to defiant fists.

"Forward!"

Sabres slashed downward into enraged faces. Hooves struck out at writhing bodies. Before the horsemen, the forefront of the mob crumpled, stretched bleeding and broken across the stones. But pressure from the rear forced the mob relentlessly forward. They were too tightly packed to flee, and the press was too thick for the guardsmen to maneuver.

The city guard struggled forward and into the clawing masses—crimson-drenched sabres rising and falling with deadly skill. Still the mob surged forward, breaking the mounted ranks in suicidal rushes, trapping small groups of horsemen within its seething mass. Horses screamed and went down, carrying their riders to brutal death. Stones and hurled weapons cleared saddle after saddle. Like scorpions against an army of ants, the guardsmen slew and slew, and in slaying were pulled down.

In an eddy of the slaughter, where the mob cared more to pillage the jewellers' pavilions than to face slashing steel, the last of the city guard regrouped. Less than a score remained, exhausted and wounded. They were surrounded by the howling mob—murderous beasts united by the Prophet's unleashing of man's inborn lust for violence.

Lieutenant Anchara was half-blinded from a gash over his eye. Mechanically he tied a bandage about his head. "Can we break free from them?" he asked dully.

Fordheir glanced toward the distant streets, where murder and looting already spread, and the maelstrom of feral bodies that struggled about them. He ached in every joint, and he wished for a pitcher of ale.

"I don't think we can," he said. "For every man there comes a time for death. I think that time has come for us."

II

The Man Who Feared Shadows

The thin-faced man ducked through the open doorway of the Red Gables in Sandotneri of the southern kingdoms. Instantly he turned and craned his long neck to examine the street he had just quitted, where men went about their business in the heat and dust of late afternoon. Furtively he turned again to stare at those who sought refuge from the sun in the inn's public room. A bony hand wiped sweat from a sunken face where hunted eyes glared from dark hollows. He gazed questioningly at the innkeeper, who shook his head. Then, with a final scrutiny of the room, the frightened man darted for the stairs and disappeared into the rooms overhead.

"That one looks like he's scared of his own shadow," commented one of the drinkers at the bar.

The innkeeper looked at him significantly. "He is."

"How's that?"

The innkeeper shrugged his squat shoulders. The Red Gables was not a hostelry where the affairs of its guests greatly concerned the management. Still . . .

"Scared of his shadow. Bolts his door soon as the sun

gets low, stays there until it's broad daylight. Keeps the room lit bright as day—must burn up fifty or more candles in a night, I don't know."

"Burns candles all night?"

"Yeah. Got ten, fifteen maybe burning all at once, got them all around his bed. And three oil lamps. Damn good luck he doesn't burn the whole place down. I'd throw him out, but his money's good."

"So what's he afraid of?"

"Shadows."

"Shadows?"

"That's what he muttered one morning when he stumbles down here, crazy drunk and looking for more. 'Shadows,' he said."

"But it's the light that makes the shadows."

"No, it's the light that lets you see what the shadows are up to." The hosteler tapped his balding head. "He says."

"Seen them like that before," another allowed. "Things coming after them. Generally it's things that come out of a pipe or too many mugs of old 'here's how.' " He tossed off his mug.

"Sometimes they come from elsewhere," said the black-robed figure no one had seen enter.

The frightened man hurried down the hallway, a heavy bronze key ready in his hand. The Red Gables was one of the few inns in this quarter of the city to offer rooms whose doors were equipped with such locks. It cost more, but there were some who would not begrudge the expense. Thus it was with some sense of security that the frightened man fumbled with the lock and slipped into his room.

He closed the door and gave a small scared bleat at the sight of the man who waited inside.

His visitor was not a reassuring figure. At rather more than twice the thin man's bulk, he sprawled half out of the room's single chair. His massive frame exuded an aura of almost bestial strength. The figure might have been that of some great ape, clad in black leather trousers

and sleeveless vest. Ruthless intelligence showed in the brutal face, framed by nape-length red hair and a beard like rust. A red silk scarf encircled his thick neck, and belted across the barrel chest, the hilt of a Carsultyal sword protruded over his right shoulder. The savage blue eyes held a note in their stare that promised sudden carnage should that huge left hand reach for the hilt.

But it was with relief that the frightened man breathed, "Kane!"

The big man raised a craggy eyebrow. "What's wrong with you, Tapper? You're as jumpy as a cat in a butcher shop. You haven't made some slip . . . ?"

Tapper shook his head. "No, nothing wrong, Kane."

"I hired you because the word was you were a man with nerve," Kane's voice held a note of warning. "You act like a man who's about to break."

"It's not this business, Kane. It's something else."

"What, then? I'm running too close to the edge here to risk everything on a man who can't carry his end."

Tapper nodded nervously, licking dry lips. Maybe it was time again to start running. If he could make the coast . . .

"I'm all right," he maintained sullenly. "Thoem, Kane! You don't know what it was like getting out of Shapeli. The Satakis are everywhere—nothing can stand up to them! I showed my heels to Ingoldi hours before they slaughtered the guard and looted the city. Got away from Brandis the same night they surrounded the town and burned it. I barely escaped the slaughter at Emleoas by putting a Sataki armband on and joining the looters—and I passed over what they'd left of General Cumdeller's mercenaries in riding for the border. The Prophet's got tens of thousands under his banner, Kane. When it's a choice between join the pillagers or die in the ashes, they don't even need to listen to that devil's spiel to swear their souls to Sataki!"

"There's a hundred miles of savannah between Sandotneri and the forests of Shapeli," Kane reminded him drily. "I hardly think Orted Ak-Ceddi will look for you here."

Tapper started, glancing at the other sidelong to judge whether Kane's remark implied more than scornful jest. Although Tapper's betrayal of the former bandit leader was not common knowledge in the southern kingdoms, Kane was incredibly well informed.

The frightened man shuddered, tried to repress memories of weeks of terror-haunted flight. Sataki's shadowy tentacles reached far. Time and again the Prophet's hordes had rolled over towns where Tapper sought refuge. And the nights. . . . The nights were worst. The bounty gold had not lasted long, nor had the money that came to hand afterward.

Then out of Shapeli and into the southern kingdoms, where the shadow of the Dark Crusade had not reached. For the spy and the assassin, there was always ready gold in the southern kingdoms. Gold enough to reach the coast, to buy passage to the Southern Continent or lands beyond.

The southern kingdoms was a geographic designation more grandiose than actual. South of Shapeli's forestland, the Great Northern Continent curved westward as a broad region of savannah around the Inland Sea to the north and the Southern Sound on the south—then northward past the western shore of the Inland Sea, where the grasslands rose into the Altanstand Mountains. Beyond their rocky bourne the greater portion of the continental mass sprawled out over some four thousand miles, eventually to join the Northern Ice Sea. Centuries before Halbros-Serrantho had attempted to unite this northern portion of the continent, but the Serranthonian Empire now lay broken in decay, and the only other formidable attempt to lay claim to the whole of the Great Northern Continent was the fading memory of Ashertiri's ill-fated war with Carsultyal in mankind's youth.

The southern kingdoms might number fifty or a hundred, depending on the most recent marriages and inheritances, annexations and secessions, alliances and civil wars. Scattered across a 2500 mile stretch of sun-scorched veldt, the stubbornly independent hereditary holdings were constantly at odds over territorial and water

rights. Fierce border wars and deadly court intrigues were hallowed tradition in the southern kingdoms. A man like Tapper might grow wealthy in a single night. Or he might die in an instant.

Tapper uneasily considered his visitor. But the gold he needed demanded certain risks, and the frightened man knew darker fears than the dangers of political conspiracy. He noted with dread the greying skies outside the bulls-eye panes.

"How'd you get in here?" he asked in alarm. The window, unshuttered but securely bolted, overlooked a fifteen foot drop to the street below.

"I got in," Kane told him unhelpfully. He scowled impatiently while the other man fretted about the room, lighting candles from the oil lamps that burned throughout the day. The tiny room stank of tallow and soot and fear.

"You don't like the dark," Kane observed sarcastically.

"No. No, I don't. Nor shadows."

"A spy who fears the dark!" Kane sneered. "I'm rather afraid I made a mistake when I entrusted you to . . ."

"I'm all right, I tell you!" Tapper insisted. "I took care of my part!"

Kane smiled. "Ah! Did you now? Let me see."

"You've got the gold?"

"Of course. I told you I pay well for useful information." Kane drew a heavy almoner from his belt. It chinked when he tossed it in his broad palm.

"All right. You know the kind of risks I'm running," Tapper muttered, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"We're both running. What do you have for me?"

"Well, it's true that Esketra is receiving Jarvo secretly in her chambers," Tapper began.

"Which I knew when I hired you."

"No—only surmised. You wanted me to find out how Jarvo passed from his house to the palace without being seen by any of your men."

"Well?"

"I've found out how."

"For that information I *will* pay."

"You were right when you guessed it would have to be through some hidden passage," Tapper told him. "And you'd figured right on the rest of it, too."

"Esketra *does* have the chart!"

"Esketra *did* have it," Tapper grinned. He drew a square of folded parchment from inside his doublet. "But not since this afternoon."

Kane tossed him the almoner. "There's more for you if this is what I hope it is."

"It's what you were after," Tapper proudly assured him, extending the yellowed sheet. "Got the whole story *and* the map from one of her maids—who'll be wanting more of your gold, too. When she couldn't see Jarvo as she wanted without compromising herself, Esketra got into Owrinos' secret papers and stole the old chart of the palace's hidden ways. She traced a passage from her chambers to under the wall and out through the royal crypts at the temple of Thoem. Jarvo had a tunnel driven to connect his house with the cellars of the apartment block across the way. When he wants, he slips past your watchers and ducks off for the temple—makes his way to Esketra's chambers through the old network of passages. Esketra kept the chart as guard against getting lost in the maze—then never bothered to risk replacing it. The maid stole it from her."

Eagerly Kane unfolded the ancient parchment. The document was all he had dared hope for—an architectural diagram of the Palace of Sandotneri, outlining completely the network of secret rooms and hidden passageways within the huge stone structure. Every palace has its hidden ways, and frequently their builders died because of their knowledge. It was a secret closely guarded, entrusted by father to heir. Sometimes its complexity necessitated a map such as this that now lay outspread before Kane's scrutiny.

"Excellent!" he complimented the thief. "But you'll need to see it's returned before it's missed. I'll make a copy."

"Returning it will be an added risk."

"For which you'll be paid. Send down for pen and paper. I'll copy this immediately."

Kane waited impatiently for writing materials to be brought up. This had been a rare piece of fortune.

Owrinos was presently king of Sandotneri and the lands to which that city lay claim. But his health was failing, and without male heir his throne must soon fall to a cousin. The matter of succession was hotly contested by two powerful branches of the royal family, whose factions were popularly designated the Reds and the Blues. Kane, a foreign mercenary who had risen to generalship of the Sandotneri cavalry, was a powerful supporter of the Reds. Jarvo, who claimed distant kinship to Owrinos, was a firm adherent of the Blues, whose faction was gaining in prestige. He was also a bitter enemy to Kane ever since Owrinos had appointed Kane to generalship over Jarvo in recognition of the outlander's brilliance in recent campaigns.

At best Kane had hoped with this piece of intrigue to discredit Jarvo and the Blues by exposing the younger officer's liaison with Esketra—denouncing such as an effort of the Blues to win influence through seduction of Owrinos' daughter. But Kane's greatest hope, based on certain information and careful deduction, had been to get his hands on just such a document as now lay on the table before him.

Kane concentrated on copying the yellowed parchment, while Tapper anxiously paced the room and stared at the candles. His huge hands plied pen and ink with far greater dexterity than might have been expected from a mercenary. In his mind's eye Kane envisioned the hidden passageways filled with his men, secret doors springing open to emit his assassins . . .

A sudden pounding at the door brought an end to Kane's dreams of *coup d'etat*. He sprang to his feet with a curse. In his concentration he had not noticed the stealthy approach of men in the hallway outside, nor the ominous subdual of the crowd noises downstairs.

The door shuddered under another blow. The men outside were not bothering to ask admittance.

Kane cracked the window. In the darkened street below, men with blue scarves at their throats looked up and pointed. Kane closed the window.

The door shuddered again. It was a sturdy door, but the men outside were using a ram.

"Kane, what are we going to do?"

"Keep calm!" Kane snarled. "We'll bluff it out!"

Giving the chart and nearly finished copy a last close look, he stuffed them into the fireplace and applied a candle. The aged parchment burned readily, and Kane had already stirred the ashes into dust when the lock surrendered and the door crashed inward.

Armed Blues tumbled into the room to face Kane and the long blade that menaced them in his left hand.

"Yes?" suggested Kane evenly.

Pushing past his men, Colonel Jarvo strode into the room. The officer's girlishly handsome face smiled with triumph. A fine blue cloak swirled impressively about his silvered mail. A head shorter than Kane's six feet, Jarvo's broad shoulders and thick limbs gave him a stocky appearance that contrasted to the grace of his movements.

"General Kane, I hereby arrest you for the high crimes of treason and conspiracy. And this man with you," he added, indicating Tapper. "Surrender your sword."

Tapper's half-drawn weapon dropped to the floor.

Kane's blade did not waver. "What game is this, Jarvo?" he growled, his back to the wall. "If you want my sword, you know how to get it."

Jarvo gave him a venomous look, remembering tardily that he should have brought archers. "Useless, Kane. Your game is lost. Thirty of my men surround the inn."

"Did you think I'd come here alone?" Kane sneered. "Fifty of mine await my call."

"You bluff, Kane," Jarvo said with more confidence than he felt. After all, Kane's presence here was of Kane's planning, and his own coming a rash act born of the moment.

He pressed on confidently. "Your man was seen in close conversation with one of Esketra's servants. His manner was furtive; it was suspected that the maid was stealing

her mistress' property and passing it to him—but when we put her to question she confessed theft of an unexpected sort. Your rat's hole had earlier been marked, and when it was reported to me that you were seen entering the Red Gables, I lost no time surrounding the place."

Kane stared at Tapper in feigned surprise. "You mean this man has been receiving stolen jewellery? Well, I'll admit I was suspicious of his offer to sell me a fine emerald pendant for so little. But the price demanded I at least examine the gems . . ."

"Kane, the game is over," Jarvo insisted tiredly.

"Of course, if I'd recognized the jewellery as belonging to Esketra . . .

"Kane, Kane. The wench told all as the rack unjointed her limbs." But Jarvo knew that, while the connection was damning, the maid had only known of Tapper's part in the matter. Kane was powerful enough to make a stab at blustering this through, might well succeed. Further, his own indiscretions with Esketra would discredit him when brought out.

Jarvo indicated the fireplace and the ashes smeared on Kane's boot. "I see the object of the theft has flown into the night—but we still hold the thief to give evidence."

"Certainly," Kane agreed. "And my men and I will see that he's safely imprisoned for questioning."

"I'll see to that," Jarvo promised.

Kane shook his head. "In all candor, Colonel Jarvo, in view of your openly expressed antipathy and the severity of the charges you bring against me, I must insist that my men and I share in the prisoner's custody."

"Oh, Kane. We waste time." Jarvo wished he could emulate the other's icy calm. In spite of his hatred of the outlander, there was much about Kane that Jarvo wished were part of his own make-up. In a quiet moment he had once reflected he might like Kane, if he did not envy him so.

"Stand close by me, Tapper," warned Kane. "I fear these men don't mean to see you have fair trial."

The frightened man obeyed—knowing Kane might well

intend to kill him with a sudden thrust, but certain that the Blues would show him no mercy.

Jarvo vacillated, not wishing to stake everything on one throw of the dice by rushing Kane.

In the strained tableau, a candle sputtered out. Tapper uneasily watched its final string of white smoke.

Jarvo remembered something curious his spies had told him. "It's awfully bright in here," he observed. "Surely we can do without all these candles."

He signed to one of his men, who cautiously moved to snuff the room's candles—wary of Kane's blade, for all of them here had seen its bloody artistry.

"Kane . . ." muttered Tapper in a shaky voice.

"It's all right," Kane purred. "I'm here."

"Kane, you don't . . ." Tapper trailed off miserably. A quick look from Kane promised instant death at the first foolish move.

Jarvo grinned. "And all these lamps. Surely three are too many for this small room."

Another of the Blues extinguished two of the oil lamps. Only one lamp remained now, burning on the window ledge beside Kane. Tapper crouched beside it, moaning softly.

"Come talk to me, Tapper," Jarvo pleaded soothingly. "There's plenty of light out in the hall."

"Stay here!" Kane warned. He would have to kill Tapper soon now, he realized. He had hesitated this long—not willing to touch off a violent climax to his carefully laid plans, if he could possibly preserve the situation.

The lamp flickered. It was low on oil. Tapper could see the level of fuel in the blown glass bowl.

"I'm going to wait out in the hallway," Jarvo said. The man could break, or Kane could damn himself by killing him—either way. "Soon the lamp will go out, and then it will get very dark in this room. Very, very dark. But I'll be out here waiting in the light."

"Wait!" Tapper darted away from Kane. "Look, I . . ."

"Take this lamp too, Jarvo," Kane said.

His blade snagged the lamp's fingerhold, slung it across the tiny room. Jarvo whirled in the doorway, just as the

glass vessel smashed against the jamb. The lamp exploded, spraying flaming oil over the side of his face.

Yelling in agony, Jarvo stumbled backward from the room. He clawed at his face, smothering the gnawing flames in the folds of his cloak, as his men fell back in confusion.

The room was plunged intc total darkness. Tapper began to scream.

The window crashed open. There was a brief glimpse of a huge figure hurtling into the moonless night. The door banged shut.

Catching the sill to break his fall, Kane dropped the remaining distance to the street. Like a great cat, he hit the pavement—blade slashing. Two of Jarvo's men died before surprise had left their faces.

"Reds! To me!" Kane roared. "Come on, Tapper! Jump for it!"

He cursed the man, striking down another of the Blues. "Reds! To me!"

A clash of hooves, and a half-dozen riders bore down the narrow street. The remaining Blues broke for the shelter of the inn.

Kane caught an empty saddle and swung up. "Tapper! Damn you, jump for it!"

The Blues were starting back into the street, realizing the Reds were but a few.

Kane swore. "Well, they've got him—and that's the game! Let's ride! There's hell to pay now!"

And inside the Red Gables, Jarvo's men helped him to his feet. He was sick with the agony of his face. One eye saw nothing but a red haze of pain.

"Kane's escaped!" someone told him. "He had men with horses waiting."

Jarvo cursed from more than pain. "And the other man?"

"No one else came out the window."

"Then he's still here—and we've got him!" Jarvo laughed mirthlessly. "No one's come out past us. Bring a light here!"

Someone brought a lantern. They kicked open the door, shone the light into the silent room.

Tapper's body, slack and broken-necked, was already slumping to the floor. And although it melted an instant after the lamplight silhouetted the macabre struggle, the sooty shape that gripped the thin throat in murderous hands was clearly Tapper's own shadow.

III

Goldfish

The garden smelled of roses, yellow and hot in the westering sun, and the chalky undercurrent of baked flagstones washed by the whispering spray of the cool fountain. On the terrace below, where the cascading spring spilled down from ledge to mossy ledge to collect in a deep pool, Esketra laughed softly. Silver-grey willows stirred long lacy fronds in the warm lazy breeze of evening, echoing the laughter of the girl who stood beneath their shade. A shimmer of bright color on the silver and black surface of the pool. Popeyed and ungainly and pompously finned, the goldfish danced and darted for the crumbs that trickled from her long graceful fingers.

Grotesque little creatures, mused Jarvo sullenly, and for all their extravagant fins and scintillant color, beautiful only at a distance. He scuffed his boots impatiently and cleared his throat.

Esketra pretended to notice him for the first time. Her grey eyes widened and her wide lips made a bright smile of greeting. "Why, Colonel . . . No, it's *General*

Jarvo now! How good of you to call upon me—after so long an absence."

"I thought discretion appropriate," Jarvo answered levelly. The late sun pierced the tracery of the willows, so that splashes of light and shadow alternately masked and limned the white face and waist-length coils of luminous black hair, the slender figure that swayed within the grey gauzy kaftan. Jarvo forgot that for a week he had begged in vain to see her.

"Yes," Esketra drawled agreement. "Discretion. And . . . ?"

Jarvo stepped into the shadow of the willows. "Can we talk here?"

"There are only my goldfish to eavesdrop here," laughed Esketra, looking across the sun-dappled garden.

Standing beside her, Jarvo spoke in a low voice. "I've covered our little intrigue quite well, I think. It is known only that the maid had stolen the map to pass to Kane's henchman. Those two are dead, and Kane has fled no man knows where. The tunnel has been cunningly sealed over, and there's no one who can link either of our names to this bit of treachery."

"Masterfully handled, my general," approved Esketra, intently studying the bandages that enswathed the left half of his face. She dropped her eyes. "Perhaps we should forgo such rendezvous for a time—until new scandals command the tongues of court gossips."

"That wait will be difficult to endure," murmured Jarvo, seeking to draw her close.

"You'll endure it if you love me!" Esketra insisted, evading his embrace. "What? Would you have my name bandied about like some barracks doxy's?"

Jarvo fumbled clumsily. "No—of course, I'll do as you say. We must be careful."

"You'll be busy," Esketra told him. "With your new command. And Kane is still at large."

The right half of Jarvo's face smiled grimly. "Took to his heels with those of his men who were loyal to him. Fled beyond our borders. For all I know, Kane's slunk back to whatever strange land he came from. His treason

and disgrace have broken the Reds. Those who haven't declared their sudden affection for the Blues have seen fit to make a discreet withdrawal from court. The Reds are discredited. Even should Kane dare to return, the damage to their reputation is beyond repair."

"What a strange man he was!" Esketra shuddered. "Did anyone ever really find out anything about his past?"

"No," said Jarvo, which was not entirely true.

"But Kane might return," Esketra persisted. "His ambitions were obvious. A man of his intelligence and capability might . . ."

Jarvo squared his shoulders and drew himself up to full height; the extra heel of his cavalry boots brought him even with Esketra's brow. "Kane is finished," he snapped. "If he's fool enough to return to Sandotneri, I'll make an end to the hulking bastard and all his cunning schemes!"

Esketra laughed softly and held a crumb low over the pool. A golden head struggled above the surface, caught the morsel from her long fingers, fell back with a splash upon its slower fellows.

Jarvo flushed. Within his heart he knew that Kane's precipitous flight had been an error on his rival's part, that had Kane known of Tapper's death, he might well have brazened it out. At best the uneasy stalemate would have continued; more likely there would have been open war between the two factions. Jarvo feared Kane, and so hated him. His present victory was a hollow bitterness, for it had been a windfall—Kane's blunder, not his own merit. He wondered if Esketra sensed this, saw beneath his bluster and mocked him.

"So my general will protect me from Kane," smiled Esketra, with a bland inflection that was neither sarcastic nor adulatory. She scattered the last handful of crumbs petulantly.

"And what of these ominous rumblings we hear from Shapeli? Is it true that some madman has raised an army from one half of the peasantry and massacred the other half?"

"So it is rumored." Jarvo shrugged. "And the refugees who clamour at our borders swear such rumors are fact."

His face hurt and his palms were sweaty. He rubbed his hands on his trousers and edged closer to Esketra. Except for the purl of the fountain and the rustle of the willows, the garden was silent. At a distance, along the high garden wall, workmen grubbed at a blighted tree. The sound of their mattocks against roots did not reach the pool.

"You will, no doubt, be away on our northern borders for a time," Esketra went on. "To personally assess the danger from Shapeli. Kane would have done that."

Jarvo tasted gall. "Orted's peasant army presents no threat to Sandotneri," he growled. "A mob of poorly armed louts can't face a charge of heavy cavalry."

"Did I not hear something of a mercenary army the Satakis slaughtered?"

"Cumdeller was a fool! He thought to challenge Orted on his own ground—in a forest where a snake can't pass between two trees without sucking in its breath. It's four days march across open savannah to reach Sandotneri—four days for trained infantry. For the Satakis there would be no march back."

"But a new general would be expected to make a personal appraisal of the situation," Esketra persisted.

Jarvo stood silent. The breeze rustled his fine blue cloak and cooled his silvered mail. It carried a scent of her perfume upon the breath of roses, and his palms still sweated against his tight trouser. Esketra remained an arm's length from him and showed him her exquisite profile.

"You were badly burned by Kane's fire?" she wondered, gazing sidelong at his bandaged face.

Jarvo's mouth felt dry. "The surgeons applied unguents and compresses to soften the scarring. They say my left eye will never know day from night."

"Blinded," mused Esketra with a shiver. "Maimed because you sought to preserve my name from blemish. I owe you a great debt of gratitude."

She held her slim fingers over the surface. An iridescent-scaled body lurched from the pool, nuzzled for her fingers. She held nothing in her hand, and, still groping, the bright fish tumbled back into the pool. The other goldfish, assuming it had accepted a morsel, set upon it.

Esketra laughed with the willows and the fountain. She extended her fingers for Jarvo's kiss.

"Be certain to come see me," she smiled. "When you return from your tour of the northern frontier."

IV

Shadows That Slay

From deep within the forests, terror crawled forth. It's tentacled advance was as crushing and relentless as the numberless and strangling roots of the shadowy forestland —massive roots that twined endlessly through the soil, pried apart the crumbling rock beneath. Terror was power. Irresistible power of uncounted arms raised to destroy; power directed by one sinister mind that commanded its numberless creatures to pillage and to slay. Power was terror.

From out of the night and the forest, the Satakis ringed the city wall. For hours now Erill had listened to their chanting. From her vantage atop a flat roof she could see their torches flickering beneath the massive trees. Torches more numerous than the stars in the cloudless sky, enclosing Gillera as surely as the star-flecked night enclosed the forest.

Erill smelled the soot of their torches, reflected that soon the cloudless skies would be obscured with the smoke of Gillera. Bitterly the girl cursed the lord mayor and his aldermen for their stupidity in believing the city walls

could withstand such a siege. Further she cursed the spiteful turn of fortune that had left her carnival troupe caught up in the advance of the Satakis, trapped here in Gillera. As an afterthought she cursed the invidious fate that had destined her to become a mime in a threadbare travelling carnival.

She had seen a lot, lived a lot, for a girl not past her teens; that she would live to see more seemed to her problematical. If hers had been a hard life, its experience had in turn hardened Erill, tempered her with a resourcefulness and resilience that told her when to cringe and when to twist the knife. It was a toughness that served her well in the decade since her dimly remembered parents sold her to a brothel in Ingoldi.

Old Wurdis, who bossed the motley troupe of acrobats, conjurers, grifters and mimes, found her hidden in one of the wagons as they rolled away from Ingoldi and its inhospitable officials. Having no cause to love that city or its authorities, Wurdis let her remain with the carnival. He never forgot to remind the girl that every member of the troupe must do his part, earn his keep, pull his share of the load. His nagging homilies forever in her ears, Erill learned to do one thing and another for him and about the carnival. When someone left an asp in Wurdis' boot one night, another assumed management of the loose-knit caravan, and Erill made her own way.

She was thin, with the flat muscles and agile limbs of an acrobat, and her figure seemed to have attained such fullness as it ever would. She had a firm jaw, a square chin, full lips and straight nose, and the sort of mobile features that remained expressive under a painted mask. Her hair was a close-curled shock of blonde, and her eyes were a shade of green that matched the fillet of jade beads she always wore.

Jade also was the tiny pipe from which she sucked the last tingling lungful of opiated hashish. Erill blew a wreath of smoke toward the wavering torches beyond the wall, coughed softly, and despondently examined the oily lump of ash in the stained bowl. It was only ash, and

crumbled beneath the stub of reed taper. Erill cursed again. It was her last.

"You'd be advised to keep your wits about you tonight," admonished Boree, joining her along the parapet. "If the Satakis carry the wall, there's a chance to make a break during the street fighting."

"What the hell difference does it make, Boree?" Erill scowled at the pock-faced fortune teller whose wagon she shared. "There's no refuge in Gillera. We're trapped here. The Satakis will roll over these ancient walls in a single rush—and they'll massacre us all because these damn fools dared to resist them."

Boree shrugged her mannish shoulders. "Where there's life, there's a chance."

"Chance, hell."

Boree drew a flat ebony box from the purse at her belt. She released its lid, slipped the deck of lacquered black squares into her palm. "See what your chances are," she invited, extending the deck to Erill.

Erill made a motion to take the cards, then waved them aside. "Hell, I'll take my chances as I find them."

"Or as they find you," Boree intoned sombrely.

"Go haunt someone else tonight, will you?" Erill snapped. "Whatever's coming, I just want to get enough of a load on so I won't feel it when it hits me."

"Just take the cards," Boree persisted.

If only to get rid of her, Erill accepted the deck of twenty-seven black cards, shuffled them expertly, cut three from the deck and lay them face down on the parapet.

Boree's long-nailed fingers flipped them over. Erill tried to peer past her shoulder, but the older woman's black tangle of hair obscured her view. Silently Boree returned the cards to their ebony casket.

"Well?"

"You're too hashish-sotted to do it right," the dark-haired woman told her gruffly. Not meeting Erill's gaze, she quickly turned and left the rooftop.

Erill swore and hugged her shoulders. She wore only a thin bandeau and slitted cotton skirt of calf length. It

seemed suddenly cold, alone here in the night. The last night of her life, most probably.

Damn Boree! Erill had wandered up here for solitude and hashish-tinted oblivion. Boree's gloomy presence had restored a grim sense of reality to the night.

"I don't want to die," Erill whispered to the night.

"Of course not," the night answered.

Erill caught her breath, spun about. The hashish . . . of course.

"Nor is there need for you to die," the night assured her.

Erill pressed a knuckle to her teeth, felt for the triangular-bladed poniard she wore at her belt.

A portion of the darkness detached itself. It was a figure in a black robe, face hidden in shadowy cowl. Erill had seen the priests of Sataki in her girlhood in Ingoldi. She knew that she looked upon one now.

"Only those who oppose Sataki shall die," the cowled figure whispered. "It is the rulers of Gillera who thus deny Sataki's power, and not Gillera's people. What a pity that the masses must suffer for the sins of their rulers."

Erill stared at the shadowy figure, still uncertain whether this was reality or some hellish apparition born of the opium-tainted hashish.

"The choice is yours," whispered the priest, advancing as she pressed her back to the parapet. "Sataki or death. Choose now, girl!"

Erill's hand closed upon the hilt of the poniard, then froze there. For now the moonlight shone brightly enough to see that there was nothing but shadows without the black cowl.

"Choose!"

"Sataki!" breathed Erill in a gasp, as the creature of shadow loomed before her.

"Wisely chosen, girl. But be certain that there is no turning back."

Erill nodded dumbly.

"Take this." A shadow-filled sleeve extended above her outstretched hand. A cold smooth weight fell against

her palm. It was a jet-black disc of stone. Vaguely Erill knew it for a replica of the gold medallions worn by the priests of Sataki. Her skin shrank from its alien touch.

"No one will pay you heed," the whisper continued. "You shall serve Sataki in this."

The shadow whispered further commands, made snickering promises and insinuations that burned through Erill's consciousness like acid on bare flesh.

Erill cried out, as one from nightmare. With a dry laugh, the black robe collapsed upon itself, rustled hollowly onto the rooftop, dissolving as it fell. When she gaped in terror at her feet, the roof tiles were barren of cloth or flesh.

A hashish nightmare?

A cold, sinister disc of jet lay clutched in her palm.

Dimly Erill heard a voice within her soul, shrieking for her to hurl the evil medallion into the night. But the shadow had given her certain commands, and she could only obey. With dream-like steps, Erill turned from the parapet and descended into the fear-laden streets.

There had been an attempt to enforce military curfew, but the mobs of refugees seeking vain asylum within Gillera had so overflowed the city that the effort was abandoned. Inns, hostelries and caravanserai were all filled beyond floorspace. When disused buildings and empty hovels were filled to the point of collapse, refugees spilled into streets and squares in makeshift huts, tents, wagons, or whatever fell to hand. Others filled alleys and doorways with nothing but their tattered garments for covering. The city fathers had at first thought to swell the ranks of Gillera's defenders by admitting all who sought shelter within its walls. When they at last closed the gates to all without, the flood of refugees had overburdened Gillera's facilities for food, water and sanitation. While the city's high walls might withstand the Satakis, Gillera could never endure a lengthy siege.

Terror strangled Gillera in a thousand chill tentacles. The city was doomed. All within recognized its inexorability. All that remained was the hour of its coming. The Satakis were merciless. No army, no city could stand

before them. The choice was capitulation or annihilation. Gillera had chosen to defy the Dark Crusade.

The chants of the Satakis carried from the nighted forest and over the beleaguered walls and into the terror-haunted streets. A hundred thousand within listened to the voice of doom, knowing in an hour or a day or another day that doom would engulf them.

Dull faces watched Erill without interest as she passed by them. Taverns overflowed into the streets, until their stores of wine and ale were exhausted. Men and women reeled and sprawled along the streets, heedless in the final haze of dissipations. Houses stood barred and barricaded, frightened eyes squinting past shuttered windows. Temples were mobbed with wailing throngs, beseeching Thoem or Vaul to protect them from the terror of the hordes of a far older god. In the hidden recesses of secret fanes, certain horrible mystic rites were performed with anxious speed.

Now and again a voice called out to Erill, inviting the girl to share a cup or an embrace, begging her for food or coin, challenging her to join in prayer or sacrifice in this final hour. Erill passed by, seeming neither to hear their voices, nor to see their fear-twisted faces. A shadow had spoken to her, and all else seemed no more than a dream and the echo of a dream.

The night was cloudless, the stars cold and bright. Yet it seemed to Erill that a legion of shadows marched across the heavens, writher across the lurid moon. Coiling down from the abyss of night, the shadows danced and slithered from beyond the stars, crept behind her in a hellish pack as she followed the winding streets and alleys of Gillera.

The soft scuff of her sandals came distant and dimly to her ears. The rest of the city seemed enveloped in black cobweb, muffling even the throb of her heart. Her skin was pale with the night's chill, but the only thing Erill felt was the cold, evil disc that burned her clenched fist.

The city gate was a glaring brilliance of light that stung her eyes. Erill hesitated a moment, then strode forward.

The relic of wars of past centuries, the gates of Gillera were ponderous valves of cast bronze, heavily fortified

from twin barbicans. Grim-faced guardsmen manned the fortifications, knowing that an attack must come from this quarter, unless the Satakis were prepared to sustain ruinous casualties along the wall. While a human wave with scaling ladders might carry a portion of the wall, they would have to cross the outer defenses of dry moat and stake-set earthworks under murderous fire from archers behind the parapet.

Tense figures stared out into the night, watching the growing sea of wavering torchlight. Within the gateway, soldiers and armed citizens milled about, talking in low voices, seeing to various tasks, catching snatches of sleep. A few gave note to the ashen-faced girl who wove a course between the jostling bodies from her set features, presumably seeking a lover or kinsman amongst the massed defenders. There were many such, seeking a tearful farewell on this night.

Erill's mission was otherwise.

Before the brazen gates Erill halted. Cold seeped through her breast, her heart no longer seemed to beat. The hateful blaze of fires and cressets scathed her flesh. A number of heads turned curiously toward the blonde girl who paused before the beleaguered portal.

Moving as in dream, Erill hurled the onyx disc against the massive bronze doors, and cried out the phrases the shadow had whispered to her.

A last-instant presentiment of doom. Shouts as those nearest to the girl whirled to seize her, silence her.

Then darkness smothered the fires and the torches, and from the stars the shadow pack crawled down to slay and to slay.

Erill screamed, fell back—shielding her face in her arms. To see a man writhe beneath the strangling embrace of his own shadow is a monstrous thing, nor does the vision seem less hideous when it is mirrored over a hundred times.

The blackness, riven by choked screams, was absolute, and clotted the area of the portal like some vast and misshapen spider. Erill heard her own voice screaming, felt the hypnotic spell of the shadow lift from her soul.

It was like an awakening from nightmare, and into a reality that offered no refuge from the embrace of horror.

Through slitted eyes she saw the shadow horde—grotesque densities of deeper blackness than the night—fling aside their dead, stream toward the bronze gates. The sigil of Sataki, swollen to colossal proportions, overspread the brazen valves where Erill's hand had cast it.

Shadow hands drew at the iron bolts; shadow forms heaved against the massive valves. With the deceptively slow majesty of a falling tree, the brazen portals of Gillera swung ponderously open.

Drained, half-senseless, Erill slumped amidst the twisted bodies of the slain, as the shadow pack streamed past the yawning portal and into the darkness beyond. Dimly she was aware of a wild roaring, as of two monstrous winds. One was the panic-stricken cries of those within Gillera, suddenly aware that something from beyond the dark had opened their city to their slayers. The other was the blood-lusting howls of the Satakis as they poured past the unguarded gates.

V

Sharks

The leaden waters of the Inland Sea thundered fitfully against the iron-hard fangs of the promontory overlooking the small harbor of Bern's Cove. The tide was at ebb, and the sour-sweet smell of seaweed and brine and fish hung on the desultory breeze. It mingled feverishly with the stale-sour stench of the refugee camp strewn out along the beach like jetsam of some darker tide.

Several months earlier Bern's Cove had sheltered a few hundred fishermen and their families. Today uncounted refugees swamped the tiny village and the rocky beaches beyond. Tents and huts and brush lean-tos afforded shade to those who could claim such luxuries; others huddled in the sparse shade of the storm-sculpted headland. The equatorial sun made the beaches shimmering expanses of white-hot flame, summoning forth a miasma of sweat and refuse and filth and fear. Typhoid was already killing faster than heat or starvation, and there was a dread whisper of cholera.

As Sandotneri closed its borders to the ever-increasing flood of refugees from the Prophet's conquests, those who

sought to flee the Dark Crusade crowded the scattered towns and fishing villages along the western shore of the Inland Sea. Those who could, bought passage on whatever vessel might take them aboard. Ships were few; the cost of passage quickly soared. Most waited on the beach—waited for more ships to come to port, schemed and begged for the cost of a berth, endured the heat and misery for the hope of flight. Most simply waited. And waited.

Within the village itself, floorspace for a reed pallet rented nightly at a sum that would have purchased any dwelling in Bern's Cove a few months before. Food and drink sold for whatever price a merchant cared to demand. Fishermen who owned any vessel larger than a rowboat were in a quandary whether to reap the certain wealth their catches brought from those who clamoured for food, or instead to dare the sudden storms of the Inland Sea for the gold of those who begged passage to distant shores.

Between the village and the refugee camp, a hastily thrown up patchwork of awnings and pavilions contained the overflow of merchants and opportunists of every sort who gathered wherever the misfortunes of war meant ready wealth. Northward, beyond the sea and savannah, the forests of Shapeli lay under the shadow of the Satakis. That this shadow of dread might soon engulf those beyond the forest's fringe in no way troubled the appetites of the vultures.

Beneath the shade of a sailcloth awning, Captain Steiern mopped the sweat from his round face with a silken scarf and sipped wine from a golden flagon. Returning the flagon to the heavy wooden table beside him, he leaned back in his chair and smiled at the anxious faces that crowded beyond the shade.

"Who's next?" he inquired lazily. The oaken chair creaked beneath his beefy frame. Golden coins made a bright chink as a mate counted the last of them into the strongbox upon the table.

Below the promontory, Captain Steiern's caravel, the *Cormorant*, rode her anchor and tempted the hopes of

those on the shimmering beach. Her lateen sails were neatly furled, and at the distance no one could see their careless patches or the cracked mast. The *Cormorant* had made harbor that morning, and despite the exorbitant demands of her captain, already her decks would soon be crowded with passengers.

"Come quickly now!" Steiern called. "Only a few berths remain, then I dare take on no more. Who's next? Show me only ten marks of gold or whatever barter that's equivalent. Ten marks, my friends, for safe passage to far Krussin. Ten marks for your lives and your freedom."

"Ten marks should purchase that leaky barge of yours," scoffed a disgruntled onlooker.

Several of Steiern's burly hands scowled, but the captain only sipped his wine. "Well then, my would-be shipowner," he said evenly. "Save your gold to buy the next leaky barge to make port. Could be another ship will put in before the Satakis hang you all up to dry. Come, my friends, ten marks for safe passage to Krussin, far from the Prophet's armies."

"Krussin, hell!" grunted the other. He turned to the radish-faced man beside him. "Let's get away from here. That tub is doing well to float at anchor, let alone cross the Inland Sea in summer."

"Well, what choice is there?" demanded his comrade, following the taller man through the crowd. "Either plague or starvation, or the Satakis—we rot here unless we find passage. Thoem curse Sandotneri for closing her borders to us! The southern kingdoms will regret the thousands they turned away, when the Prophet burns a swath through *their* lands!"

"That madman and his rabble won't venture beyond Shapeli," growled a third bystander, alike turning away in disgust. His ragged gear marked him as a former officer of the municipal guard from one of the many cities to fall to the Satakis.

The three—the other two evidently merchants who had fled with little more than their lives—paused to scowl as a luckier refugee pushed through the crowd to pour a heap of gold coins upon the captain's table. Steiern

swept them up with rapacious fingers. In the lull between breakers they could almost hear the drone of flies.

"Orted won't venture beyond Shapeli?" inquired a new voice from behind them.

The trio turned to glare at the newcomer. He led a black stallion that must have stood seventeen hands. A man with such a mount might well have ten marks for passage, so that they looked at him with some calculation and little favor.

"No, Orted won't," snapped the former guardsman. "He's mad as a tomb beetle, but he's too shrewd a leader to risk his peasant mob against the cavalry of the southern kingdoms. He'll have to be content to consolidate his power in Shapeli."

"Then why do men pay ten marks for passage with Captain Steiern?" the newcomer asked sardonically.

"Because it's death to remain in Shapeli—unless you join the Satakis," growled the tall merchant, with the tired patience of one who explains the obvious.

"And the Satakis are certain to swoop down on Bern's Cove," whined the other, wiping stringy white hair from his red face. "Orted will crush the border towns, if only to punish those who have fled his Dark Crusade. The Prophet is mad—or possessed!"

"True," agreed his companion. "It goes beyond power-lust or greed. Orted is stark mad. He won't be content with Shapeli. He'll want to extend his power into the southern kingdoms. There will be no stopping the Dark Crusade."

"Mounted steel and a march under the hot sun will stop him!" sneered the guardsman. "If Orted leads his rabble onto the plain, Sandotneri's cavalry will cut the Satakis into crow bait."

"A fat lot of good that will do us," grumbled the shorter merchant. "By then we'll be dead—caught between Sandotneri and Shapeli. For it's certain the Prophet will invade the southern kingdoms."

"Then it's certain he'll get a welcome he'll never forget," the guardsman insisted. "You can't face a cavalry

charge with a mob of peasants—and that's all Orted's invincible army amounts to."

"Friend, you appear to be a man not without means," inveigled the taller merchant, scratching his hatchet jaw. "Perhaps you can help us book passage with Captain Steiern. I have certain rich holdings near Krussin. My associate here has well-placed relations along the coast there. We have but a part of the fee; your loan for the remainder will be generously repaid once we make port."

The stranger turned his back and swung astride his mount. Holding rein for a moment, he stared down at them thoughtfully. "You've saved me a voyage—I return your favor," he told them abruptly. "There's no refuge for you aboard the *Cormorant*. I've ridden all along the coast, and I've seen Captain Steiern play his game in every port along the way. Once beyond the harbor, his passengers are shark bait, and the *Cormorant* sails on for the next cargo of fools."

"Ten marks, my friends!" came Steiern's voice. "Surely ten marks is not too dear a price!"

"Thoem!" muttered the tall merchant, his face ashen. "But wait—what favor have we done you?"

"Like you, I've been seeking passage to another shore," the rider replied. "But your words suggest that there's work for me right here."

Kane spurred his stallion northward.

VI

Red Harvest

"Thoem! Their army covers the earth!"

Jarvo scowled and snorted, "Army, hell! Look at them, Ridaze. They're nothing more than a mob."

The sun beat an amber flame across the limitless savannah. It was still burning its arc across the eastern sky, and by the time it reached its zenith the sea of tall grass would shimmer in yellow-green waves. The last rainfall had been weeks before. Climbing thunderheads of dust rose from the northern and southern horizons, signalling the advance of the two armies.

Crawling across the northern horizon marched a seemingly endless wave of human flesh. Two hundred thousand? Five hundred thousand? Jarvo could not tell. Scouting reports indicated the latter estimate, possibly more. A fraction were mounted, the vast majority on foot; Jarvo disdained to consider such rabble in terms of cavalry and infantry. Wagons and impedimenta were scattered at random throughout the surging mass of bodies. The Prophet's army had all the order and discipline of a rioting mob in search of a fight. Jarvo was

surprised it had held together for the two-day trek south of Shapeli's forested demesne.

"We should have spared ourselves a day's ride, and let them walk all the farther," grumbled Ridaze, doffing his armet to mop his face. "A few more days under this sun, and our work would be all the simpler. Any of the Satakis left standing would be too wilted to do much but wait for our blades to come reaping."

"There's too many of them to risk allowing a closer approach to our borders," Jarvo reminded his subordinate. "Let those who escape us run back to Shapeli, and not skulk around Sandotneri's marches."

Ridaze lifted an eyebrow. "You think some may escape us?" The other officers chuckled.

"Too many here to kill in a day," Jarvo grinned sourly. "See to your men now, and remember: no looting until the rout is complete, then as you will. Oh—and take no prisoners."

"Not even the cute ones?" another officer leered.

"That counts as loot," Ridaze laughed.

"Good hunting," Jarvo dismissed them. His colonels saluted and rode off to where their commands waited.

Jarvo frowned, scratching at the thick scar that disfigured the left side of his face. The hot sun tightened and seared the leprous tissue. Beneath its black patch, sweat stung the eye that had no more vision than the boiled egg it resembled. Despite the heat, Jarvo replaced his vizored helmet.

Some months had passed since that night at the Red Gables. The burns had healed—healed with severe scarring for all the ointments and assurances of the physicians. Esketra had been very sympathetic. Jarvo had seen her only three times since their rendezvous in her garden. Each time she had been on the arm of a different court gallant; she had expressed very touching concern for him. A score of attempts to meet with her alone had been politely, firmly rebuffed. Jarvo told himself he had no reason for jealousy. They must maintain discretion for yet awhile longer.

Kane had dropped off the face of the earth; not even

the ghost of a rumor as to where he had vanished. That pained Jarvo far worse than the agony of his face, for he found he hated Kane more and more each time he passed a mirror.

With Esketra's unaccountable aloofness making life in Sandotneri intolerable for him, Jarvo welcomed the reports from the frontier that Órted Ak-Ceddi was massing his ragtag army for an invasion of the southern kingdoms. It still seemed incomprehensible to him that a leader of Orted's reputed cunning would embark on such a foolhardy expedition. The whole of Shapeli now lay under the Satakis' control. With so many conquests to consolidate, Orted was mad to grasp for more.

Perhaps it was no more than the familiar pattern of a tyrant whose victories only inflamed his greed for yet more conquests. Perhaps the Prophet was truly insane. Jarvo shrugged. It mattered little to him why the Dark Crusade dared venture beyond the confines of Shapeli's dense forests.

There were disturbing rumors that the priests of Sataki had employed certain sorceries to facilitate the Prophet's conquests. Jarvo was inclined to discount such rumors, although the dearth of information concerning the cult of Sataki was a source of unease.

More to the point, countless horrified accounts from those who fled Shapeli afforded hard evidence that the Prophet relied on mob violence of an unparalleled scale for his victories. Overwhelming numbers and ruthless terror were the extent of Orted's tactics. Messy but effective—on the Prophet's own ground. Today the field was one of Jarvo's choosing.

The savannah was relieved by an almost imperceptible rise and fall of the terrain. While it was inaccurate to consider the Sandotneri position that of high ground, there was sufficient rise to command a prospect of the advancing Satakis. As their horde slowly crept forth from the haze of their dust, Jarvo felt the first twinge of uncertainty. Their army covered the horizon. Jarvo had never before seen half so many bodies assembled in one number-

less mass. The Dark Crusade must have emptied the forests of Shapeli.

Weeks before, the Satakis had overwhelmed the last towns along the forest's edge and the coast. Scouting parties had watched closely thereafter. At word of the Prophet's impending invasion, Jarvo had ridden north from Sandotneri with ten regiments of light horse and five of heavy cavalry. Mustering the frontier outposts of their garrisons increased his ranks by an equivalent of another ten regiments of light mounted—about half of that archers. Thirty thousand men against easily ten times that number. Trained warriors against an undisciplined mob.

Jarvo felt a fierce rush of pride to command such an army. Momentary doubt vanished even as it formed, and his only misgiving was that there was small glory in the slaughter of peasants. Rising in his stirrups, Jarvo gave the signal to attack.

There was no formal battle line to the Sataki front—only a vast polymorphic mass of bodies advancing on foot. Now they milled in confusion before the impending charge of Sandotneri cavalry. Trained officers might have forced them into some sort of effective defensive posture, but the Satakis had scrupulously massacred whatever armies and garrisons that had vainly defended Shapeli's cities from their onslaught. Such officers as Orted had were chosen from the worst cutthroats and bullies of the rabble. While their commands were obeyed out of fear, none of the Prophet's generals had any effective knowledge of warfare, to say nothing of how to receive a cavalry charge.

Wary of some hidden ploy, Jarvo opened the battle with a tentative thrust of four regiments of light horse along the enemy van, and split his six regiments of mounted archers into a two-pronged sweep of either flank. His heavy cavalry he entirely withheld until initial contact could furnish certain measure of the Sataki army.

The Sataki front struggled to present a firm wall of defense to the Sandotneri attack. Scattered companies of horsemen detached themselves from the main body of the army, galloping forth to meet the charge of light horse.

Behind them, the mass of foot compressed along the van to form a wall of shields and spears. Desultory archery fire spattered from behind the mass of bodies—more of a danger to the Sataki horsemen than to the Sandotneri charge, still well beyond range.

Silver and deadly in the morning sun, the Sandotneri light cavalry swept toward the approaching wave of riders. Each trooper wore a hauberk of fine chain mail, and carried a round buckler and the long cavalry sabre common to the southern kingdoms. Like all warriors of this limitless savannah, they were horsemen almost from birth.

The Sataki horsemen were mounted on such horse as had fallen to them in the conquest of Shapeli, armed and armored with whatever spoils came to hand. While outnumbering the four Sandotneri regiments, they galloped to meet them with somewhat less precision than a stampede.

Maneuvering swiftly, the Sandotneri archers closed from either flank. They were two darker masses in the distance, as in place of drawn sabres they wielded the short composite cavalry bows of the southern kingdoms—heavy weapons whose iron-barbed shafts could penetrate mail. Clad alike in hauberks, the archers also carried sabres in saddle scabbards, and could act as a reserve once the supply of arrows was exhausted.

Watching from his vantage, Jarvo waited with his five regiments of heavy cavalry as his center, the remaining regiments of light horse drawn up on either wing. He studied the imminent contact with heart-stopping intensity —unwilling to commit further men until he felt certain of the enemy.

Across the sea of grass, the Sandotneri horse slashed through the Sataki riders as a scythe reaps ripe wheat. Sabres flashed beneath the rising sun; riderless horses plunged away in flight. The amber grassland stirred beneath a rising mist of yellow dust; the tall stalks were crushed and trampled, drenched in sodden blotches of scarlet.

The Sataki horsemen were no match for the veteran

troopers of Sandotneri. Unskilled both in horsemanship and in the use of weapons from horseback, they might have fared better on foot. In a slashing tumult, the Sandotneri rode through them—sabres emptying saddles with sudden finality. The skirmish—it could hardly be termed a battle—held for only a few minutes of swirling carnage. Then the survivors broke away, attempted to turn back for the main body of the Prophet's army.

A number of the horses did return to the Sataki line.

Now, cutting across the Satakis' flanks, the mounted archers strafed the discomfited front ranks with devastating effect. The short composite bows—laminated horn and dense wood and sinew—drilled their iron-headed shafts through plundered mail and improvised shields. In the packed masses of humanity, every bolt found its fatal target.

Return fire—badly aimed arrows and hurled spears—took negligible casualties amongst the streaking archers. Officers yelled in vain for their men to hold their spears to await the impending charge; in a panic, the Satakis threw away the best defensive weapon they could claim.

Demoralized by the slaughter of their own mounted force, raked by the deadly fire of the Sandotneri archers—the Sataki line reeled back in disorder. The yet advancing masses behind them checked their retreat—bringing the advance to a milling halt as van and center entangled.

From his saddle, Jarvo grinned crookedly beneath his demon-mask vizor. There would be no cunning artifices from the Satakis today. The numberless horde stumbled in helpless fright from stings and scratches; it was time now to begin the killing.

"Lancers! Forward, *ho!*"

A thunderous shout answered Jarvo's command—followed by the deafening clangour as six thousand armored warriors couched their steel-headed lances. Battle horns quickly relayed the command. Jarvo was holding nothing in reserve now. Once in motion, their charge would follow the battle plan previously agreed upon.

A monstrous metallic avalanche, the charge of heavy cavalry rumbled across the trampled veldt. The pounding

hooves of their great warhorses gouged a dusty swath through the dry sod. Steel plate armor—burnished, silver-chased, etched and blued—threw back six thousand scintillant reflections of destruction to the climbing sun, and the smooth steel heads of their lances glinted like stars of a tropic night. Lance and heavy shield for each man, and slung from saddle or scabbard—broadsword, ax, or mace, to deal with those who withstood their dread charge.

Five regiments of armored, battle-hardened warriors—the most awesome fighting force of the age. Developed over centuries of internecine warfare upon the vast plains of the southern kingdoms, their heavy cavalry represented the elite military power in the land. Ordinarily a charge such as this would have been directed against a similar mounted force of some rival kingdom—with the temporary solution of one of the interminable border disputes or wars of succession in the balance. The Satakis had no comparable force, only a teeming mass of human flesh to await the Sandotneri charge.

The first regiments of light horse—virtually unscathed—swung aside before their thunderous charge. Archers fired a last few arrows into the crumbling Sataki vanguard, then rode to contain the flanks as the charge tore into the center. Behind the hooves of the heavy cavalry, the reserve regiments of light horse galloped to support the armored force, as the charge carried past the Sataki line.

Faces dull with panic gaped stupidly at the looming wave of steel. Mouths made black circles of dumb terror. Even before the wave broke over the poorly ordered line of battle, men hurled their weapons in blind fear, flung down their clumsy shields and sought to flee.

The Sandotneri charge clove through the Prophet's peasant army as a warhorse's hooves scatter a dunghill. Already drained from the ordeal of their long march, utterly demoralized before this unstoppable onslaught of steel-fanged death—the poorly armed rabble broke and fled. They were not soldiers, but a mob united by greed and by fear—a mob that would plunder and murder, yet a mob withal. They had neither the heart nor the

ability to stand before disciplined, heavily armed troops. They could do little but die.

Even flight was denied them. As the routed front of the Sataki army sought to retreat, the howling fugitives collided with those in the rear—still advancing like some blind and brainless behemoth, unaware of the annihilation that awaited. Panic spread instantly as the terrified fugitives forced through the melee, outdistancing their mounted pursuers only because it took more time to slay than to flee in the thick press.

Even as the entire Sataki horde sought to turn and flee, any semblance of orderly retreat was impossible—and any hope of a rally or rearguard action rather less likely. Burdened with ponderous trains of baggage and impedimenta, wagons of women and children, the Dark Crusade was less an army on the march than a tribal migration. The fugitives were thrown back against their own masses, hemmed in by their baggage train and the press of panic-stricken humanity.

Early in the charge, Jarvo left his lance impaled in a peasant's back. Now the Sandotneri general mechanically hewed about him with his broadsword. Only the resistance of packed human flesh brought up the Sandotneri charge, impeding it as a morass of weed clutches at a hull. For all the armed resistance they encountered, the cavalry might have ridden through unchecked.

Ranging like wolves in the fold, the light horse moved around their armored comrades, cutting down the Satakis until their arms ached and their bloodlust grew as dulled as their sabres. Strategy and tactics were vain conceits now; the task was only to hack at the shapeless and bleeding mass that sought brokenly to writhe away from its dismembered fragments. Archers exhausted their shafts, little troubled to tear them out of the dead. This was a day of meat cutting.

Across the gore-drenched field of battle, Jarvo led his troops. Some resistance flared in tiny pockets—a few had the desperate courage to die with steel in their teeth instead of in their backs. But the outcome of the battle

was not in doubt—if ever it had been. The balance of war is inexorable: When one army turns and runs, there can only be one gory, unequal conclusion.

Jarvo wondered where Orted Ak-Ceddi might be—whether their leader was dead or in hiding. Jarvo had promised ten marks of gold to the man who brought him his head—with or without the Prophet's shoulders attached. Throughout the battle there had been no report of the Prophet's whereabouts.

Ridaze eventually furnished the answer. Bored with the slaughter, he paused to interrogate a few captives. Presumably they used their last breaths of life to speak truly.

"Not here," he explained to Jarvo. "He didn't even come. The Prophet ordered his generals to lead his Dark Crusade into Sandotneri—and stayed home, snug in his palace in Ingoldi while his followers took the measure of our cavalry."

Jarvo spat out a mouthful of dust. "At least then, the stories of Orted's cunning weren't exaggerated."

The Sataki mass was broken—the survivors fleeing across the veldt in a thousand directions, pursued by mounted slayers. Jarvo decided it would be too much effort to hunt them after nightfall.

It was midafternoon.

VII

Nexus of the Crisis

Rising from the treeless horizon, the full moon burned over the trampled savannah like a white-hot coal above a troubled sea of blood. Against the horizon, beneath the white orb of the moon, a horse and rider rose from the distant veldt.

The tableau was one of eerie silence. Replete and torpid, carrion birds that had assembled before twilight croaked somnolently to one another, as they roosted beside their unfinished banquet. Silent save for quarrelsome snarls and yelps, dingoes and jackals prowled through the field of carnage. Now and again a ripple of ghoulish laughter or the explosive crack of a bone marked the presence of a feasting hyena.

The tens of thousands of dead made no sound at all.

With the approaching drum of hoofbeats, those who feasted turned their eyes toward the interloper. Vultures stretched their wings nervously. Lips drew back over gory fangs in jealous greeting. Curious wallabies and other small nocturnal creatures halted, then slipped shyly away from the oncoming rider.

The tens of thousands of dead made no move at all.

Slowly—for in the clear night air distances across the savannah seemed dreamlike and unreal—the rider approached the silent battlefield. Dark against the moon and the horizon, he might have been Death in black mail astride a black stallion. A faint breeze rustled through the high grass where the fury of battle had not torn apart the sod, carrying the scent of butchered flesh and spilled blood and violent death.

The rider slowed to study the sea of blood, then urged his snorting stallion to wade along its shores. The black stallion's heavy tread sounded like muffled drumbeats on the torn and spattered sod.

Here and there the carcass of a horse, stripped of saddle and harness. The victors had taken their own dead and wounded—there could not have been many by the signs of it—and left the field to the vanquished. A plain of the dead—men, women, children by the thousands and thousands. Peasants and gutter trash for the most part, scarcely a one of them with the aspect of a veteran fighting man. Just meat to dull cavalry blades. Crude homemade weapons and rags and tatters in place of decent blades and mail. The dead had not been despoiled, nor were there spoils here worth taking. It was a field of dead meat, and of interest only to the thousands of scavengers who would glut themselves until only bare bones remained. Then the grass would grow again, richer and greener for the nourishment, and the bones would vanish beneath the verdant sea.

Beyond the great mass of the slain, a less dense moraine of dead marked where the battle turned to retreat, and the retreat broken into rout. Away across the savannah the flood of war had washed, leaving its drift of broken bodies, cut down from behind as they fled in panic from mounted steel. The trail of death littered a swath that stretched across the far horizon, disappearing toward the shadowy forestland many miles distant. Until the pursuers tired of butchery, that trail of bodies would extend unbroken to the forest—unless there were no more to be slain.

Shadowed beneath the rising moon, the rider picked his course amidst the dead, picturing the battle that had been fought here, and the horrific slaughter that ensued. Before his practiced eye the battle was reenacted. The dead stirred and rose, fought their final battles, and died again. To his ears came the echoes of that battle, the dim ghosts of shouts and death cries.

Vultures croaked and sidled away with wings upraised. Predators snarled and slunk back from their spoil. He paid them no more heed than he paid to the slain. His thoughts were elsewhere now, and the field of carnage no longer held interest.

He had looked upon a thousand such battlefields; it might be that he would look upon a thousand such more. The rising breeze moaned a ghost-song through the waving grassland, and its death-scented breath fanned his billowing red cloak. Following the trail of death, Kane dwindled against the far horizon.

VIII

Origin of Storms

The winds of the tropic storm lashed Ingoldi. Even within the massive fortifications of Ceddi, the monstrous blasts of thunder pounded through the stone walls and rolled along the gloomy hallways. Gusts of water slashed through the balistraria, washing across the stones. Sky-spanning chains of lightning flickered eerily past the narrow apertures, to add their sporadic glare to the flaring cressets along the passages.

No less than the fury of the storm was the rage of Orted Ak-Ceddi.

A year had wrought strange transformations upon the former bandit chieftain, even as a hundred thousand pairs of hands had raised Ceddi from a crumbling pile to a towering and unassailable fortress, had moulded Ingoldi from a sprawling city into a military citadel.

The man who cast no shadow yet showed the panther-like quickness and the steel-thewed strength of the hunted outlaw. Months of unbridled dissipation had nonetheless begun to leave its mark—clothing his raw-muscled frame with an insidious smoothness of fat, suffusing his ruddy

features with shadows and lines of debauchery. His eyes, formerly alight with quick cunning, now blazed with the black flames of fanaticism, and the ponderous dynamism of absolute power.

For the moment the certainty of that absolute power was shaken, and with uncertainty arose consuming rage. With the assumption of godlike power comes the awareness of godlike passions. Not the impaled agonies of all Orted's captains could slake the Prophet's wrath.

Alone he brooded in his chambers, staring out across the storm-swept citadel beyond his tower windows. In his demonic rage, not even the priests of Sataki dared approach him. In the courtyard far below, the violent winds flung about the scarecrow limbs of the impaled officers who had failed him—giving false life to their cold flesh.

"Defeat!" Orted spat, glowering at the puppets that danced for him even in death. "Massacre!"

It mattered nothing that his generals had attempted to argue that an invasion of the southern kingdoms was suicidal folly: that his unbroken chain of victories within Shapeli were only monstrous extensions of mob violence, and that crude numbers, no matter how overpowering, could not hope to prevail in an actual drawn battle against superior discipline and weaponry. The Prophet had quickly silenced such doubts of victory by pointing out that failure to obey his commands was suicidal folly of a far more sinister degree. Sataki commanded that the southern kingdoms be subdued. Sataki must be obeyed.

That his protesting generals had had the temerity to escape his wrath by being among the first to die beneath the charge of the Sandotneri cavalry only blackened the Prophet's rage.

Orted flung open the lattice panes of a window, let the storm beat upon his livid face, the wind lash his perfumed coils of brown hair. Lightning shattered the storm-haunted night, bathing his rigid frame in its hellish glare, splashing a stark highlight to the tossing corpses far below. Stygian darkness, then flickering bursts of intense flame. Orted's movements seemed spasmodic, unreal in the

stroboscopic luminance. His thick neck straining, mouth a ghastly rictus—Orted Ak-Ceddi screamed his wrath and his defiance against the howling storm, screamed into the lightning-blasted night, where no living soul dared venture.

"There shall be no defeat!" he roared against the storm. "I shall conquer! I must conquer!"

A titanic bolt of lightning shattered the night, blinding him in its elemental flame—even as its tumultuous thunderclap deafened his hearing.

For a moment Orted Ak-Ceddi saw utter blackness, heard naught but the throbbing of his heart. Then from behind him in his chamber:

"To conquer you must have heavy cavalry."

Orted whirled at the low voice. The door of his private chambers stood open. Limned at the threshold by the flickering lightning—a silhouetted figure, massive, all but filling the doorway. A pair of eyes blazed a hellish blue beneath the storm-tossed mane of red hair.

"I am Kane. You need me."

IX

The Forging

The shrill laughter of the children chittered through the roiling dust of the parade ground. Drawn by the expanse of open ground beyond Ingoldi's walls, they gathered in shouting packs to watch the bright glitter of the cavalry drill, and to play their endless games of kickball. Within the Prophet's capital, the faces of their elders might be haunted and strained, but here beneath the city wall, heedless of the danger from hooves and steel, the children romped about with all the unaffected gusto of their youthful innocence.

Kane had demanded a parade ground on which to train the Prophet's cavalry. Kane demanded; Orted Ak-Ceddi commanded. A hundred thousand pairs of hands obeyed. A square mile of tropical hardwood forest was torn out of the earth. Roots were painstakingly grubbed forth, rocks and boulders hauled away, the denuded plain meticulously levelled and filled in, the soil packed to stony firmness. Where there had been jungle, there was now a square mile of packed earth, flat and barren as a table top.

Kane was impressed. He remembered the deadly pi-

ranha that infested the rivers of the southwestern portion of the Great Northern Continent, and the voracious march of the army ants that swarmed through the jungles there.

The parade ground stood ready and waiting when the first regiments of cavalry began to sift through the forest barrier to converge on Ingoldi.

"The Dark Crusade is a colossus—a giant," Kane told Orted. "But it is a helpless giant for all its hugeness and its strength—for it is a giant without weapons or armor. I can forge the weapons and armor your giant must have if it is to conquer.

"Give to me the gold and the power that I require," said Kane. "And I shall forge the Sword of Sataki."

"Who are you?" the Prophet whispered, and in his secret thoughts he wondered: *What are you?*

Gold and power. Orted Ak-Ceddi had both in abundance. To win yet more, he gave Kane whatever the stranger demanded.

Kane cast the gold to the four winds, and from lands beyond Shapeli men answered his call.

"From what I've seen of your army," Kane said, "I'll have to rely heavily on mercenary troops for cavalry. There's only so much one can do in terms of time and training. I rather hope some of them might make effective pikemen."

"They are the Children of Sataki!" stormed Orted dangerously.

"They are rabble," Kane replied. "I cannot forge a sword from mud and dung."

"Your mercenaries will not be true believers!" the Prophet thundered.

"They will be soldiers; that is sufficient," Kane told him. "As to their religion, they'll believe whatever you pay them to believe. A sword has no soul."

It was a critical point. Kane misread its implication.

Gold. Orted Ak-Ceddi had the plunder of all Shapeli to fill his coffers. He had made a fool's gamble and lost an army. Kane took his gold and bought him a second army—brighter and deadlier than the first, for Kane spent the gold wisely.

It was a game Kane knew well.

To the south, Sandotneri held the frontier behind a wall of armor and steel. Content with the slaughter of the Prophet's army, Jarvo felt no inclination to risk further punitive expeditions into the trackless forests of Shapeli. In his palace in Sandotneri, King Owrinos languished interminably upon his death bed—cancer gnawing like a worm. Court intrigue intensified as to his successor, and the hero of the marches of Shapeli cut a most impressive figure on parade. With such to concern him, Jarvo left the frontier to those of his officers who seemed least favorable to his cause, and wondered how Esketra could appear so infatuated with a shallow sycophant like Ridaze.

With only a half-hearted watch to see that no new army marched forth from Shapeli, the frontier guard little cared who might choose to ride into Shapeli. At first only lone horsemen and small bands of riders; then—as clandestine gold filled the campaign chests of the garrison commanders—no one challenged if an army rode by night.

Elsewhere, along Shapeli's western coast, ships crossed and recrossed the Inland Sea to the western mass of the Great Northern Continent. There, from the decadent kingdoms that had sprung up amidst the ruins of the vast Serranthonian Empire, certain men heeded the call of gold, looked to swords and battle gear, took passage for the forests of Shapeli.

Upon the northern and eastern coasts of this peninsular subcontinent beat the rolling breakers of the Eastern Sea. A thousand leagues across its azure waves lay the continental mass of Lartroxia, where men named this same expanse of water the Western Sea. Ships could and did cross this great span of ocean, but such crossings had grown less and less common as both of the northern supercontinents lapsed into centuries of barbarism. Kane had no need to cross an ocean for the men he sought.

Even within Shapeli, Kane found those who could be forged into the metal he required. Some among the Satakis —through native talent or rudimentary training—could

handle weapons, sit a horse, and not endanger comrade more than enemy. Kane chose them from the rabble, armed them, trained them.

A general amnesty—proclaimed by Kane over Orted's objections—lured a scattering of half-starved ex-guardsmen out of hiding.

"They defied Sataki!" the Prophet exploded.

"They have since repented; be magnanimous," Kane said. "I need trained men for my officers."

A core of trained officers—professional soldiers—and about them a framework of veteran warriors. This was the key to Kane's ambitious design. From this core he could build an army, swelling its ranks from the Sataki masses—to such degree as the best of them could be trained.

With gold and power, it was only a factor of time.

Meanwhile the forges of Shapeli blackened the sky, as craftsmen worked day and night turning out the weapons and armor Kane demanded. Kane ransacked the whole of Shapeli to fill the stables at Ingoldi, lavished shiploads of gold to bring in the mounts he still required.

It was a formidable task. It would have been impossible without the thousands of mercenaries who answered Kane's summons.

To think of such men as knights or samurai would be inaccurate. While some claimed aristocratic lineage, in an age of shattered empire, and no dynasty of note in centuries—of uncounted petty kingdoms and principalities—such pretensions were a conceit. Nor were these landed gentry who owed allegiance to some feudal lord, although there were some with considerable holdings and private armies. It was an age of near anarchy, when a man might take whatever he could hold, and force of might overruled all laws temporal, spiritual, or natural. Long a bucolic backwater of city-states and agrarian villages, Shapeli had only rejoined its era.

The arms, armor, and horse of such a soldier represented a huge investment. The skill to use them effectively demanded years of training. Yet in an age of constant warfare, such professional soldiers could grow wealthy

from selling their services, or from private endeavours of a less glorious nature.

Call them free companions or *condottieri* or mercenaries. They were a warrior class, without code or values other than each man's personal creed, owing allegiance to whatever cause paid well. Their ranks were open to any man who could claim the prerequisite weapons and accoutrements. Those who also had the necessary skills might, with luck, live long and eventful careers.

These were the men Kane summoned. Most came to him with their own arms and mounts; some only with their scars. They were an army that lacked only coherence to be ready to fight.

For the Satakis, it was a different story. Kane selected the most promising, turned them over to his veteran officers. He hoped that several months of training and drill might hammer them into acceptable light cavalry. As for the rest—perhaps a few worthwhile regiments of pikemen and foot soldiers. Incredibly, the Prophet's followers still numbered in the hundreds of thousands—Shapeli's forests had sheltered a population of some millions before Orted launched his Dark Crusade. The best of the Prophet's army had been thrown away against the Sandotneri charge. Kane supposed the dregs that remained might be dangerous enough to a cornered foe.

"They can hold a sword; they can fight," argued Orted Ak-Ceddi.

"They can stop a sword well enough, I trust," Kane sneered.

For months Kane drilled them on the parade ground at Ingoldi. With surgical precision he excised the useless, gave command to the best, organized and reorganized. The long hours of toil at last began to show results. Upon the steel core of his mercenary force, the mismatched components and raw material slowly welded together into a fighting unit. Under the guidance of veterans, the Sataki regiments took shape—a fusion of battle-hardened mercenaries and newly trained recruits from the Prophet's hordes.

Kane was, for the most part, not displeased with their

progress. The Sword of Sataki made an impressive show, at drill or on parade. Kane knew the test of battle was yet to come, and that this was the only test that mattered. He was withal reasonably confident of his men.

Indeed, someone might have pointed out that the greater portion of Kane's officers were men who had served under Kane in Sandotneri. Doubtless, had Orted remarked upon this, Kane would have told him, and truthfully, that he needed officers whom he knew he could trust.

It was with some satisfaction that Kane turned from reviewing the day's cavalry drill, and leisurely rode back across the parade ground with several of his officers.

"The Sword of Sataki has been forged, I rather think," he remarked to his staff. "There remains only the task of honing it."

And blooding it, he told himself.

Despite the heavy rainfall in Shapeli, the tropic sun quickly dried out the packed earth. Through the thin dust lazily drifted the laughter of children at their play. Heedless of the riders' approach, the children played their game of kickball almost under their hooves. Shrieking gaily, they propelled the bounding objects across the hard clay.

"Watch it!" Kane pulled rein, swerved as a small girl recklessly chased the rolling kickball across his path. The huge back stallion reared, pawed its deadly hooves. With a frightened squeal, the child darted away.

"That's General Kane!" breathed excited voices. "Now you've done it! Run!" The gang of children scattered like leaves.

The girl stood her ground—wanting her kickball, but not daring to approach while Kane calmed his stamping mount.

Liking her mettle, Kane leaned from his saddle, caught up the kickball by its matted hair. Casually he glanced at the battered features of the young woman's head, almost unrecognizable from dirt and clotted gore. The bare feet of the children had all but pulped this kickball in the course of their game.

Kane handed down the grisly object to the anxious girl—her blue eyes big with wonder at receiving attention from so important a man. "This one has about had it," he told her, and pointed to the row of impaled heads along the city wall. "You'd better put this back and get yourself another kickball."

Each morning the heads of persons suspected of disloyalty to Orted and hence to Sataki were put on display. The children of Shapeli were quick to find new sport with such grim trophies.

"Oh, no, sir," replied the girl, gravely accepting the battered head. "I want to keep this one. She's my mother."

X

At the Tower of Yslsl

Ingoldi lay beneath the veil of night, pierced by the stars that seemed too close and too bright in the tropic skies. It was yet an hour before the false dawn, and the streets were deserted. Houses were silent behind bolts and shutters, and even the Defenders of Sataki, the Prophet's special police corps, seemed to be asleep at this hour.

Hooves made a hollow echo along the empty streets. If any awoke at the sound, they waited without breathing for the hoofbeats to pass by. It was the hoofbeats of a great black stallion, and no man cared to encounter horse or rider at this lonely hour of the night.

Kane, sleepless on these nights, rode alone through the deserted city, wrapped in his thoughts. Such nocturnal ramblings were of little solace, for Kane hated Ingoldi.

The capital of the Satakis bore little resemblance to the city of two years ago. A good third of Ingoldi had been burned in the aftermath of rioting at the Guild Fair; most of what remained was razed by order of the Prophet.

Magnificent temples and mansions of the wealthy were despoiled and carted away piecemeal by the Satakis.

As the Prophet's hordes streamed into his capital in the wake of his victories, houses and public buildings that had stood for centuries were demolished. From the blocks of barren rubble, ungainly dormitories and communal dwellings sprang up like huge and featureless fungi. The city's picturesque courts and narrow, winding streets were swallowed up in the rebuilding, supplanted by broad avenues of geometric pattern—military thoroughfares for the marching horde. Outlying gardens and villas were trampled into the ashes and muck, and in their place arose a high wall to enclose the unlovely new city and its elbowing masses.

Two years ago, a sprawling and indolent city, shaped by centuries of dreamy transformation. Today it was a teeming and ugly military barracks, born of directed violence. It reminded Kane of some colossal anthill, flung together for no purpose other than to house the faceless units of the Prophet's killing machine.

Even Ceddi, ancient citadel of the priests of Sataki, had not escaped the transmutation. Its crumbling stone walls and angular towers—old when the city of Ingoldi sprang up in its shadow, eventually to encircle the sombre fortress—were razed and cannibalized for building stone. Higher walls and grander fortifications arose from the ancient foundations. Blocky, featureless halls and towers replaced the broken spires and antique edifices of ancient Ceddi. Only beneath the earth, in Ceddi's hidden cellars, were the Prophet's renovations without consequence.

Kane knew the city and its sinister fortress of old. It pained him to see the architectures of past ages smashed beneath the utilitarian juggernaut of the Dark Crusade. The sacrifice of untold human lives meant nothing to Kane. A stone wall, being a somewhat more enduring entity, impressed him the more deeply with its loss.

Kane suddenly sneered at his own melancholia. He had looked upon the passing of too many lives, too many walls of stone, to allow himself to brood upon it tonight.

He drew rein. There was one edifice where the ghosts

of lost ages lay undisturbed. He stood before it now: the Tower of Yslsl.

The black stone tower had waited here long centuries ago, when the priests of Sataki first penetrated Shapeli to raise the log palisade of Ceddi. They came to burrow down to the buried fane of their deity, to restore the worship of the prehuman god or devil whose secrets had been revealed to their leaders. Of the tower and of what hands had raised it, their legends retained only nebulous hints. Of Yslsl, even less was remembered.

The walls of the tower rose as solid and foreboding in that distant age as they stood today. The builders of Ceddi incorporated the tower within their log palisade, as a redoubt against the attacks of the savage tribes within the great forest. While there seldom were specific incidents, the tower was center of countless dark rumors and unwholesome superstitions. It was never occupied or put to use for any length of time, and when stone walls replaced Ceddi's palisade, the Tower of Yslsl was not included within the *enceinte*. Nor was it within the Prophet's renovated line of fortifications.

There had been no attempt to cannibalize the tower for its building stone. At least, if such an attempt had ever been made, it was not repeated.

In the shadow of the Prophet's citadel, engulfed by the featureless hives of his minions, the Tower of Yslsl nonetheless stood apart from these things, as it had stood apart from the older city, and before that from the untrod forest. Silent and sombre, the Tower of Yslsl brooded in this night as it had through nights before the dawn of man.

The tower regarded Kane, and Kane regarded the tower.

Restless yet, Kane dismounted. Angel snorted, shied fretfully away from the tower. Kane spoke soothingly, stroked the stallion's neck until he grew calmer. Surrounding the tower was a circle of desolation, a cleared area of rubble and broken walls. Kane left his mount untethered; Angel would wait for him there, and no one would dare approach Kane's stallion.

The tower was round and without apparent taper,

rising somewhat over a hundred feet, and perhaps a quarter of that in diameter. It was built of massive blocks of black stone, resembling basalt, perfectly fitted in unmortared joints. Even after untold centuries, at no point had the joints eroded beyond the thickness of a sword blade. Except for its deepset doorway, the tower walls were unbroken by window or aperture of any sort.

There was a door, iron-bound, of timber blackened and iron-hard with age—fitted there in a previous century during one of the sporadic efforts to utilize the empty tower. The Satakis had replaced the iron bolts and cleared away the debris within, with the object of once again using the structure as a redoubt. Once the new fortifications were completed, the Tower of Yslsl was again abandoned to dust and shadows.

The door opened to Kane's hand, and he stepped inside. Within there was deeper night, but this did not greatly appear to inconvenience Kane.

Arising from the barren earth, a spiral stairway climbed the interior wall. Of curious design, each step was an unbroken intrusion of the wall at that point—jutting out into open space to a breadth where two men might pass with care. Efforts to erect floors at levels along the wall had been made at various times. Timbers had rotted and fallen in; the wall remained. The Satakis had removed most of the debris, so that, gazing upward, Kane had an unobstructed view of the tower interior.

The free-standing stairway rose in a precise spiral. If there was a taper to the interior wall, it was not discernible. The walls were some four feet at the doorway, a sheer face interrupted only by the stairway. A half-circle of starlight shimmered from high above.

Leisurely Kane climbed the stairway. He had climbed these same steps on a number of occasions, and he made his way with confidence.

At the summit, the stairway opened onto a semicircular ledge—a half-moon floor which appeared to be of one mammoth slab of stone. Above this, the tower walls continued another ten feet, then abruptly terminated. Over the centuries, various authorities had argued that the

tower must have contained a roof and interior chambers at the time of its building timber constructions that had rotted away with time, even as had latter day efforts at such embellishments. It must have been thus, for otherwise the tower could be of no comprehensible purpose. Explanations as to how its engineers raised that titanic half-circle of stone to the tower's hundred foot peak were less satisfactory.

There was yet another wondrous mystery to the tower. Set into the curving wall at the top of the stairway, there where a man might stand on the half-moon ledge and contemplate it, was a huge sunburst of jet.

The circular pattern extended from the ledge to the top of the tower wall, and resembled nothing more than a stylized representation of the sun. The sunburst was set flush with the stone of the wall, but was a lustrous rather than a dull black—obsidian, as opposed to basalt, although the resemblance here to either igneous mineral was superficial. Some suggested it was carved from a separate stone and cunningly set into the wall; others claimed it was instead the achievement of some lost process of annealing and polishing. Despite its age, the sunburst showed neither scratches nor chips.

It was popularly believed that Yslsl had been a sun god, that this was his temple, and that here was his symbolic portrayal. It was a convenient explanation, although sceptics argued that the symbolic sunrays were too suggestive of tentacles, and that such vague legends as did survive hinted that Yslsl was anything but a sun god.

Kane, had he cared to do so, might have given them more definite information. And he might have told them that this tower had an exact counterpart on the other side of the earth—in a land whose people made similarly foolish efforts to overlay the dark legends that still persisted. Of other such towers, Kane could only speculate.

Tonight when he reached the semicircular ledge, Kane saw that he was not alone.

Crouched beneath the jet sunburst, a slender girl stared wild-eyed at his approach. Kane looked at her curiously.

She held a poniard as if she knew how to use it, but Kane made no move toward his own swordhilt.

"Put your sting away," he told her, not caring to deal with a terror-stricken girl on this narrow ledge.

"General Kane, is it?" hissed the girl, making no move. "Why do you follow me here?"

Kane laughed. "Why do you lie in wait for me?"

She thought a moment. "If you didn't follow me, then what business could you have here in the Tower of Yslsl?"

"If you aren't an assassin, what business could you possibly have in the Lair of Yslsl?" Kane countered.

"That's easily answered. I came up here to leap off."

"Then what should you care whether I followed you or not? Leap away and have done."

She laughed bitterly and returned her poniard to its sheath. The eyes beneath her jade fillet were haunted. "I don't have the nerve. I never do. Some night I'll miss a step in the dark, and that will serve as well."

Kane shrugged and stepped onto the stone floor. The girl drew away, watching him closely. She was pretty in a thin-but-not-fragile way. Kane ignored her after a casual glance. He had been seeking solitude, and the girl had broken in upon his mood.

"Why did you call this the *Lair* of Yslsl?"

Kane studied her. "Do you really want to know?"

There was a note to his voice that brought her about. "Sure, tell me. I got over being terrified over a year ago in Gillera." She wished he'd turn his eyes from hers all the same.

Kane touched the black sunburst. It was unnaturally cold to his fingers. "This is a doorway, if you know how to open it. And beyond the doorway, Yslsl waits patiently as a spider in his lair."

"What is Yslsl?"

"A demon, of a sort," Kane replied vaguely. "There is no appropriate term in your language. Think of this world as but one chamber in a vast castle, and think of Yslsl as something old and evil who dwells in the next room—something cunning who has found a way to open a tiny doorway through the wall in between. Only he can't

crawl through to you, so he has to wait in his lair for you to crawl through to him."

"But why would anyone ever try to do that?" she protested.

"Suppose you knew that leading out of the Lair of Yslsl were other doors, leading to other rooms—rooms filled with riches and wonders beyond your wildest dreams —and that you could enter these other rooms. If you got past Yslsl."

"But what if Yslsl caught you?"

"That," Kane said, "no one knows. No one has ever escaped the Lair of Yslsl."

She shivered, as much from the eerie wistfulness of Kane's voice as from his words. "Can you open the doorway?"

"I can."

She shivered again, staring thoughtfully at the black sun. "Then open it for me, Kane. I have nothing to live for."

"It would be infinitely better to step off this ledge, and die a quick, clean death below, than to step past this doorway. You'll find no refuge in the Lair of Yslsl."

The girl cursed him, deciding that Kane had only been playing with her with this fanciful tale. "Neither is there any refuge in death!"

"So I'm told," said Kane with harsh bitterness. "So I'm told."

Kane whirled, descended the stairs in a rush. She was still wondering over his sudden anger, after his hoofbeats had died away into the night.

XI

Mourning of the Following Day

"Get rid of him."
"Kane?"
"He'll destroy you."
"Nothing can destroy me."
"He'll destroy us all."
"Don't be fools."
"What do you know of Kane?"
"I know that Kane can lead my army to victory."
"Your army! It is Kane's army."
"Fools! It is my army. My gold buys their allegiance."
"But it is Kane who leads them."
"And Kane obeys my commands."
"But if Kane should disobey?"
"Kane is but one man. He can be replaced."
"Then do so now."
"And who shall lead my army into Sandotneri?"
"Lead them yourself."
"Fools! Does a god concern himself with battles!"
"Kane is dangerous. You dare not trust him."
"Kane is but a sword. He shall slay as I command."

"He will turn on you."

"When he does, I shall find another sword."

"You should get rid of Kane now."

"Do you command me? Fools! A god does as he wills."

"But Kane? You dare not trust him."

"Dare not? Waste my time no more with your bleatings."

"Kane is not what he seems."

"I only care that Kane will lead my army against Sandotneri tomorrow."

"And against you on another day."

"That is another day. Kane shall not live to see its dawn."

The room smelled of perfume and spilled wine, caught on a warm breeze from the roses below the open window. Within there was darkness and the soft billowing of gauzy curtains. The night was utterly silent, muffled by the high thin clouds that cloaked the sky. Even the scrape of leather on stone was a sound no louder than a short breath.

He had ordered the guards to another quarter of the garden walls, clambered over the coping as they obeyed. He felt like a cheap sneak-thief and a fool, but he had to talk to her. The spies' reports had been fragmented and sent in a panic, but enough was clear. Kane was returning to Sandotneri, and he was not coming alone.

He climbed the ornate stonework to her balcony with breathless ease. It was a way he had gone on many breathless nights, well remembered for all the months that had intervened. She had told him to wait until she called for him again, but the months had dragged on and dragged on. True, there was great need for discretion—all the more so now that her father lay in his final coma. No hint of dishonor must tarnish her name, he realized that.

Silently he lifted himself to her balcony window. All was quiet within; she was sleeping at this late hour. He would softly call her name, as he had done on those other nights. She would awaken with a smile, dance over to the

window and greet him with a lingering kiss that promised . . .

He knew it was daring to steal upon her like this. She would forgive him, smile at his boldness—just as before. He would be marching north at dawn, riding out to meet Kane. He might never see her again . . .

But no! He would conquer Kane and whatever army the Satakis sent with him. He would return to Sandotneri, victorious once again. Owrinos clung to life by a spider-silk now; it was a matter of hours. With her smiles to greet him on his triumphant return, he felt certain the choice of Sandotneri's next ruler was assured. But he *must* talk with her alone . . .

He craned his head past the dreamily billowing window curtains, formed his lips to call her name. The clouds parted then, threw a pallid splash of moonlight past the swaying curtains onto the scented silks of her bed. His breath caught, and the only sound he made was the shudder of his heart.

She was not yet asleep, but neither she nor her lover had a thought to spare for the frozen mask of pain that stared past the curtains, nor did they hear the dull fall of his body to the garden below, and the blundering footsteps that fled from there.

Kane rides alone through the night.
Where do you ride tonight, Kane?
Tomorrow you lead an army on the road of conquest.
There's no rest for you tonight, Kane.
At night you're haunted by age-old dreams;
There is no refuge for Kane in sleep.
By day you're driven by the curse of your past;
And so you play your games.
Again you'll lead your army on the road to death;
Again you'll smash at cities and reap the red harvest;
Again you'll curse the gods of destiny;
While you shift the fates of kingdoms,
To play at your game.
How many times, Kane?
How many of these nights before the dawn of war?

How many armies have you led?
How many battles have you fought?
How many times have you riven the web of destiny?
And what have you ever won?
Ride on through the night, Kane, alone,
Like a comet that comes and destroys,
And drives on.
Play the game to the end, Kane.
Maybe this time.

XII

The Blooding

Marching south from Ingoldi, Kane led his army along the newly completed system of military roads that crossed the Prophet's forested domain. Old roads and market trails had been broadened and straightened, new connecting strips hewn from the forest. While Shapeli's dense forest served as a natural barrier to an invading army, neither was it possible to lead an army out of the forest with any order or dispatch. Taking advantage of the dry season, Kane moved his men expeditiously across Shapeli on the new road and to the forest fringe. Beyond the forest there were no roads, only an endless expanse of sun-scorched veldt.

At Sembrano, on the edge of the forest, Kane paused to form his regiments and to allow his baggage train to catch up. There, on the second day, he was joined by twenty regiments of foot, mustered from the Sataki strongholds to the south of Ingoldi. Another ten regiments of foot soldiers had been dispersed along the line of march to secure the road against retreat and pursuit; Kane had no intention of leaving the door to the Prophet's capital

standing open. Shapeli itself was held by forty regiments of infantry—the bulk of the Prophet's nonprofessional army—with the poorly armed and accoutred masses to shore them up in the event of siege.

The fate of the Dark Crusade hung on victory for Kane and his newly formed army. If the Sword of Sataki was broken by Sandotneri, Orted knew he would have to withstand punitive countermeasures from the southern kingdoms. Thus the Prophet of Sataki stood fast in his citadel and awaited the outcome of Kane's *chevauchée*.

Kane came down to Sembrano at the head of his entire mercenary army, including those of the Satakis who had responded to training sufficiently to flesh out his cavalry regiments. This gave Kane a strength of eight regiments of heavy cavalry and twenty-one of light horse, or nearly 35,000 men. Of these, the heavy cavalry were formed almost entirely of the *condottieri*, who brought with them the essential equippage and training. The ranks of light cavalry were filled with more of the Satakis —untried and unblooded—than Kane felt confident of, and he trusted his core of veterans to hold these regiments together. Included were seven regiments of mounted archers—again mainly comprised of mercenaries, the Satakis being indifferent archers.

This then was the Sword of Sataki, a disparate army of hardened professionals and unblooded recruits. Kane had seen to its forging. Very shortly he would try its temper against the proven edge of Sandotneri steel.

Kane was fully aware that a surprise assault on Sandotneri itself was impossible. By now Jarvo's intelligence would have informed the Sandotneri general of Kane's presence in Shapeli, and that a considerable force of armored cavalry was moving against the frontier. Kane knew that Jarvo would have to bring up his own cavalry to counter the Sataki threat. Kane's intent was straightforward: to engage the Sandotneri army and destroy it —thereby leaving the city vulnerable to siege by the Prophet's masses of foot soldiers, who might march on Sandotneri unmolested.

At the Prophet's insistence, Kane was to be accom-

panied by the twenty regiments of foot that were drawn from Shapeli's outlying towns, thereby giving Kane an additional paper strength of 24,000 infantry. Kane considered these regiments a liability, inasmuch as they would be an anchor to his mounted advance. Orted argued that they would serve as an occupying force to lay siege to Sandotneri. Kane gave in on the matter. He intended to march upon the city anyway, in order to draw Jarvo into an open battle, and under the circumstances the loss of a few days in cutting across the frontier was of little consequence. Privately Kane intended to abandon the foot soldiers to their fate should their drag imperil his cavalry, and that Orted had withheld his personal forces from the advance suggested the Prophet was willing to sacrifice another contingent of his followers.

Warfare upon the broad savannah was akin to a battle upon the high sea. The open veldt stretched untold miles without significant natural barriers; there were no defensive positions that could be outflanked. Similarly, there was no point in capturing vast tracts of grassland; these could not be held, and only served to overextend the lines of supply and communication. Further, while there was abundant fodder for their mounts, forage for the troops was limited to the agrarian estates of the outflung demesnes. Water was confined to scattered wells and to the treacherous water-meadows that buried the region's rivers and streams.

The savannah was a limitless sea of tall grass, across which the mounted armies swiftly coursed like vast armored fleets. Speed and striking power were all-important. Here, as in a great sea battle, warfare was a lightning-quick, swirling combat between heavily armed and highly mobile troops. The object was to destroy an opponent's fighting force, thereby leaving the enemy kingdom open to the invading army.

Infantry lacked the mobility that such tactics demanded. Nor could the unsupported foot soldiers withstand a charge of heavy cavalry. In the absence of fortifications or natural barriers, an army that could not maneuver with its foe could be quickly outflanked and encircled.

The savannah was a lonely expanse of emptiness; it swallowed entire armies as the sea devours whole fleets.

Kane left Sembrano before the summer's early dawn, advancing along a line of watering places that led to Sandotneri. He intended to engage Jarvo's army as quickly as possible, and a direct drive on the city was certain to force the encounter. Heavy plate armor was no protection from the broiling sun, and Kane meant to attack before his men were too exhausted to fight.

The Sword of Sataki advanced behind a tight cavalry screen—consisting of six regiments of light horse swinging over a front of some ten miles, with patrols as far as five miles in advance of the contact troops. Another two regiments of light horse were detached as flankers. Behind the screen, the main body advanced in a double column, each of three regiments of light horse, followed by four of heavy cavalry, then three more of light. Behind them rolled the ponderous baggage train, and, eating dust as tradition befitted, the twenty regiments of foot. A final regiment of light cavalry was spread out as a rearguard.

The order of march was a compact one, for Kane expected Jarvo's attack and intended to keep his forces concentrated for instant deployment once his outriders made contact with the Sandotneri army. He was prepared to sacrifice the baggage train if need be—it was primarily necessitated by the presence of the foot soldiers—and his main concern with the infantry column was to keep it out of the way of his own maneuvering.

The double columns advanced in a well ordered line of about a mile across behind the cavalry screen, with the last of the foot trailing along less than a mile to the rear. Despite loud complaints from the Prophet's newly recruited infantry, Kane brought them a good twenty-five miles the first day, to Charia's Wells. The Sandotneri garrison there was already in Kane's pay, and the small outpost capitulated without a fight. Kane bivouacked there for the night, carefully positioning his pickets and vedettes.

By dawn the next morning the columns were again in motion, disposed along the same order of march. There

were a number of desertions among the foot soldiers as the day progressed and the sun grew hotter. Kane ordered the rearguard to sabre any and all stragglers, which discouraged further attempts. While Kane had no use for them, neither did he care to have them fall into Jarvo's hands and tell all they knew of Kane's plans.

Kane drove them another twenty miles that day—a leisurely pace for the cavalry, although the raw foot soldiers were hard pressed to keep up. That night they bivouacked at Tregua Spring, a small village whose few inhabitants fled before them. The night passed without incident, and in the morning the vedettes still reported no contact with Jarvo's force.

The third day's march dragged on uneventfully. Desertions and complaints were fewer. They were well into Sandotneri's lands, and excitement and tension increased as each mile took the army closer to battle. They made another twenty miles that day, and bivouacked at Adesso Wells. There was a fair-sized outpost here, but the advance scouts found it newly deserted when they approached.

Kane doubled his pickets that night, assuming that Jarvo now was informed of his position and had pulled in all frontier garrisons to reinforce his main body. Sandotneri was only some forty miles distant—a day's hard ride for cavalry. Jarvo would have to move very soon.

About midnight excited scouts reported to Kane that Jarvo was encamped about ten miles to the south of their line of march, at the village of Meritavano. The Sandotneri general had been mustering his army within a day's ride of the city; the swiftness of Kane's advance had been unexpected, and he had only this day taken to the field to halt the Sataki drive.

Reports came quickly thereafter. Jarvo was confident of victory, and had good reason to feel so. His army had sustained only trifling casualties in the slaughter of the Sataki horde a year previous. The Sandotneri force this time was of greater strength—reported to be comprised

of twenty-four regiments of light horse and six regiments of heavy cavalry.

While Jarvo was aware that Kane led a considerable body of cavalry, it was after all a pieced-together army, untested in battle. Spies had given only vague information as to its strength, and Kane's cavalry screen had effectively concealed the nature of his troops. Jarvo's scouts had seen the straggling line of foot soldiers and the lumbering wagons of impedimenta, giving the impression that the Sataki army was a mass of infantry supported by several dispersed regiments of light cavalry. It was known that Kane had some heavy cavalry under his command, but, hidden as it was within the center of the column, its strength was grossly underestimated. A year ago the Prophet had had no armored force; it stood to reason that he could not have mustered more than a regiment since then at best.

Jarvo was confident.

Kane knew Jarvo well. And Kane knew that Jarvo would be overconfident.

Kane was on the move before dawn. By the time the climbing sun burned the light dew from the somnolent grassland, the two armies faced one another. The hour of the blooding was inescapably at hand.

Jarvo already had his ranks formed and on the advance. His plan had been to swoop down on Adesso Wells and encircle the Sataki army as it struggled to get under way. His strategy was sound, based on the information, as it was, that the invading army was primarily infantry with only token cavalry support. While he should have taken warning from the rapidity of Kane's advance, Jarvo felt there was little reason to suppose this army was much better trained than the last one the Prophet had sent to slaughter.

The Sandotneri general was somewhat disconcerted by the rapidly approaching dust cloud that bore down upon him from the northern horizon. His confidence still unshaken, Jarvo quickly deployed his regiments—six regiments of mounted archers along the first line, supported by his heavy cavalry as center, with six regiments

of light horse on either wing, and the remaining light cavalry behind center as a reserve.

The field was a monotonous stretch of savannah, unbroken by natural barriers or fortifications. It might have been a yellow carpet spread upon the floor of some immense, blue-vaulted chamber. There was an imperceptible rise to the plain toward the northern horizon, falling away to the marshes below Meritavano a few miles to the south. Jarvo counted this of no consequence.

A thin plume of dust obscured the Sataki advance, making it impossible for Jarvo to see with accuracy much beyond the front ranks. It seemed to him that Kane had deployed his troops across too long a line, and he supposed this was because Kane's cavalry screen had not effectively fallen back upon the main body of infantry.

Not caring to give Kane time to correct this error, Jarvo ordered his front line of archers to attack.

Kane's brutal face twisted into a tigerish smile as he observed the Sandotneri line. Kane knew its strength as well as Jarvo, and he knew that his was the superior force —*if* his army could fight. While another man might have been unnerved at doing battle with troops he formerly had led, to Kane the situation was not a novel one.

At this point the front lines of the two armies were somewhat over a mile apart, both sides still advancing at a walk. Kane had deployed his columns into a wide crescent, positioning his archers on either flank with the remaining fourteen regiments of light horse in two lines across the front. Deployed in a third line were his eight regiments of heavy cavalry, held in reserve until Jarvo committed his own armor. Somewhat to the rear, his infantry formed up into five marching squares with pikes and pole-axes bristling about their perimeters.

As Jarvo's mounted archers swept away from the Sandotneri front, Kane signalled for his archers to attack from the flanks. It was a tentative contact on Jarvo's part, Kane decided, probably as much to feel out the Sataki force as anything. Conservative by nature, Jarvo was following the strategy that had routed the Satakis in their earlier battle.

The move reflected his contempt for the Sataki army. While archers might take heavy toll of inadequately protected foot soldiers, against other cavalry their value was more of harrassment. A direct hit of the light, iron-headed shafts might penetrate mail, but not the steel plate armor of heavy cavalry. On the other hand, the mounts of the light cavalry were without the bardings that protected the horses of the armored regiments. Sweeping archery fire could destroy a formation with crippled and unmanageable mounts, and Kane countered to guard against this.

Preceded by a black rain of death, the two forces swirled together across the yellow plain. Kane's archers were distinguishable in the distance by their black scarves and their broad armbands of red cloth, emblazoned with the black sigil of Sataki. Jarvo, Kane noted sardonically, seemed to have ordained his own blue scarves for the whole of the Sandotneri army.

The charging archers wheeled about like countless dust-devils through the high grass. It was a lightning-swift engagement—emptying saddles across both fronts, more often sending horse and rider careening to the earth. An archer typically carried twenty-four arrows in his quiver. On this terrain, any man of them could fire six arrows a minute with accuracy—more than that if circumstances required. Quivers were emptied in a matter of a few minutes; after that it was a matter of returning to the lines or scavenging on the field.

Both sides took moderate casualties, although far from crippling. Kane's was the superior force, and the Sandotneri charge failed to penetrate. The opposing horsemen exchanged fire until their quivers emptied—then withdrew to their respective, slowly advancing lines. It was a sudden, indecisive engagement—calling to mind the curtain of lightning that precedes an approaching storm across the horizon.

Jarvo, angered by the standoff and impatient to take command of the battle, ordered his heavy cavalry to charge the center of Kane's line, at the same time sending his regiments of light horse against either horn of

the crescent to protect his flanks. The returning archers wheeled past his own flanks to advance with the reserve force. The reserve was to follow as a second wave, and join the attack wherever the Sandotneri line seemed to be breaking.

Jarvo's plan of action was to break through the cavalry ranks—thereby cutting Kane's line in two, and penetrating to the unsupported infantry in the rear. It was a good plan—assuming that Kane's cavalry would be hurled back against the panic-stricken masses of foot. The dust that obscured Kane's advance, however, hid the fact that the infantry was well to the rear—and that immediately behind the screen of light horse Kane waited with eight regiments of heavy cavalry.

The Sandotneri charge rumbled toward the Sword of Sataki, driving Kane's retreating archers before it like foam before a breaker.

Astride his stallion, Kane snarled commands to his trumpeters. An aide handed him a goblet of brandy. Kane tossed it off, with a wild laugh crushed it in his gauntleted fist. Locking down the vizor of his armet, he caught up his lance and urged Angel forward at a fast trot.

Trumpets blared all along the crescent, relaying Kane's commands through the thin dust that veiled battle pennants. Officers shouted orders above the deepening thunder of a hundred thousand hooves.

Riding several hundred yards ahead of Kane's heavy cavalry, the first and second lines of light horse abruptly divided at the center, wheeling toward the right and left horns of the crescent. As the gap at the center broke apart, the retreating regiments of archers galloped through, passing between the open ranks of the armored third line to reform at the rear. As the archers dashed to the rear and the opening in the center expanded, Kane's third line closed ranks and surged forward. Through the yellow curtain of dust, Kane led his armored cavalry onto the open savannah.

Near 10,000 steel lance heads glinted in the sun, like the sudden smile of a hungry shark. In an instant of fear,

Jarvo knew he had fallen into Kane's trap. There was no turning back.

The earth shook beneath their charge. Pounding hooves driving the ponderous mass of armored warrior and steel bardings—tore through the dense sod, ground the dry soil into numberless explosions of flying dust and pulverized rock. Like two monstrous avalanches of scintillant steel and driving muscle and bone, the opposing armies rushed together—now at full gallop, ripping apart the earth in a frenzy to smash and to slay.

Less than half a mile separated the two lines of heavy cavalry as their charge broke into full gallop. Great chunks of shuddering distance hurtled past beneath their thundering hooves. Time hung in an eerie stillness against the onrush of space. Seconds dwindled into meaningless splinters of eternity. Time was unreal.

Encased in steel universes: sight fixed on the lance-lines ahead, sound deadened by the tearing roar of hooves, smell obliterated by dusty heat, tongue choked with tension, sensation only of headlong hurtling through space. What does a meteor know of time in the instant of its final flaming plunge?

Steel and space . . . and time? . . . is *now*.

Sound is sundering steel and molten screams of rage and agony. The explosive death of a volcano, vomiting its fiery blood into the icy sea. Two waves of steel smash together. Time is still; space is motionless. Steel is totality.

Steel against steel. Muscle and bone direct us, steel protect us. Steel against steel.

Lance into shield, into breastplate and pallette, into peytral and cuello. Steel lance heads bite and glance, wooden shafts shudder and splinter. They clashed together like the fanged jaws of some unthinkable leviathan, closed with a maniacal fury that ground and shattered its endless rows of bright fangs.

Edged weapons were all but useless against plate armor. Driven by the hurtling mass of steel and thew, the leaf-bladed lance heads could pierce steel armor of man or horse with deadly effect. Even if the lance head turned, or the shaft splintered, frequently the impact in

itself was murderous—flinging an armored opponent from his saddle at full gallop. Should the unhorsed warrior survive the fall, the crushing weight of his armor might leave him helplessly pinned. Nor was the danger entirely at the point of the lance. An inexpert lancer, because the grapper transmitted much of the shock to the felt-lined lance arrest secured to the right side of his breastplate, might be flung from saddle by the same impact that drove into his opponent.

Kane tore through at the head of his charge—an awesome figure in black plate armor, forged to fit his massive frame. His black stallion, gigantic in matching steel bardings, loomed like a frothing, iron-hooved demon. His men knew he led them, and they followed into hell without further thought.

The dull thunder roll of drumming hooves—then the instant of collision. A lance pointed toward Kane across the closing gap of timeless space. Kane shifted his own lance suddenly, struck the other lance, felt it glance harmlessly across his vamplate—then his lance head angled upward to slide past his assailant's shield, strike the angle of armet and gorget. The lance head caught for an instant, the shaft bent under their combined momentum—then sprang free, and the Sandotneri rider tumbled backward from his saddle, neck already snapped.

The clangour of his fall suddenly echoed across the entire front—a strident protest of steel drowning out the bass rumble of hooves, as the two lines collided.

Kane, his lance only momentarily engaged, galloped past the unstrung puppet of steel. Already a second lance was thrusting for him. Kane swung his lance to guard; the other lance head instantly lowered, struck Kane's stallion. The hemispherical boss of the peytral deflected the point. Kane's lance, glancing from the other's shield, struck the Sandotneri cavalryman in the center of his breastplate. The steel lance head drove through breastplate, chest, and backplate. Kane's lance lifted the impaled warrior from the saddle, held him for an instant in midair—before the wooden shaft snapped.

Kane cursed and hurled the broken half into the path

of a third oncoming lancer. Lunging aside, Kane deflected the enemy lance with his shield, as his own broken lance entangled the charger's driving legs. The Sandotneri mount stumbled—at full gallop with a double burden of heavy armor and rider, it could not recover. Horse and trooper crashed head over heels as Kane drove past, unslinging the massive battle-ax from his saddle.

Another lancer thundered toward him, as Kane flung up the heavy ax. Kane twisted, caught the lance head on his shield. The shaft splintered at the impact, jarring Kane against his high cantle. His assailant held his saddle with no less difficulty. Kane swung the ax in a murderous arc as they came together. The heavy spike pean gouged through the barred vizor of the other's armet. Kane hauled on the haft, almost losing grip, as their horses pounded past each other. The spike tore free in a splatter of brain.

By now Kane's charge had carried him through the Sandotneri line. A scatter of light horse followed as a second line, but Kane ignored them for the moment. Hauling on the curb bit, he managed to wheel Angel to the right, checking his headlong charge. He had an instant's respite to draw breath and to survey the dust-veiled field. The Sandotneri charge had shattered against Kane's armored regiments. Already most of the struggling warriors had lost their lances, were smashing at one another with ax, mace and flail. Here and there Kane saw great two-handed broadswords in use—heavy blades whose crushing power served even when edge failed against steel plate.

The melee resounded like the forges of hell—a deafening cacaphony of smashing steel, pounding hooves, crashing bodies, war cries and howls of death-agony. Dust and torn sod swirled like a yellow blizzard.

Beyond the struggling mass of armor, the regiments of light cavalry engaged in a lightning storm of sabres and plunging hooves. They rode clear of the armored melee—their sabres were toys against armored horse and rider, and mail hauberks were no defense against the crushing weapons of the heavy cavalry.

The dust obscured details of the battle, but Kane could see that the horns of his crescent, reinforced as his front lines of light horse swung to either flank, had engulfed the entire Sandotneri charge. Jarvo's force was encircled. The battle was now one vast melee, and Kane had the advantage of numbers. Jarvo's only hope to escape annihilation was to break through the Sataki trap, reform his men for a fighting retreat.

And now Kane saw that the infantry squares were cautiously advancing to join the fray. The Sataki charge had overrun the Sandotneri charge, carrying the battle past the initial line of contact. The torn earth was littered with bodies in armor and mail, many still alive but crippled within the weight of their armor, pinned beneath fallen mounts. Remorseless as jackals, the foot soldiers swarmed over them—driving poniards and misericordes through mail and joints between plates, smashing in armets and breastplates with hammers and axes.

Kane hoped in their frenzy the louts could tell comrade from foe.

Now members of Kane's personal guard sifted through the chaos of steel and straining flesh, regrouped around their general for new orders. The battle was beyond the stage of strategy—a seething maelstrom of individual duels and hand-to-hand fighting. Kane dispatched several aides to order the foot soldiers to attend and help remount any of the Sandotneri troopers who might still fight—then plunged back into the melee.

Ax and shield. Hammer and mace. No lance now—the struggle was too close to wield them. Some of the armored warriors were driving into the beleaguered Sandotneri light horse –ripping through them in the dense fray like grotesque metallic sharks. Enclosed within the Sataki crescent, the Sandotneri cavalry could not maneuver. Horses screamed and reared, smashing into their comrades as riders could not manage their panicked mounts. In the press, there was no room to fight back against the garrotting Sataki encirclement.

While the Sandotneri army had not been seriously outnumbered at the start of the battle, Jarvo in his

confidence had committed two deadly blunders. He had allowed his flanks to be engulfed, and he had failed to withhold an adequate reserve.

Kane ranged through the chaotic battle, trying to seek out Jarvo. The pall of dust thickened with each passing minute, enveloping the entire field in a smothering blanket. He could see no further than a score of yards in the yellow haze. The battle surged over a square mile of torn earth and broken flesh, and his enemy eluded him in the swirling vortex that left the field strewn with an ever growing litter of death.

There was no scarcity of work for him closer at hand. Looming through the yellow murk in his black armor—now dusty and splashed with gore—Kane looked like the god of war stalking through the revels of his worshippers. If his presence in the thick of the fighting inspired his men, it also drew the desperate attacks of the trapped enemy. With Kane down, there was yet a hope of victory.

Kane wielded his battle-ax like a wand of death, cleaving shield and brassart with its wide blade, smashing through breastplate and armet with the thick spike on its opposite side. The haft was steel-strapped, turning the edges of slashing swords and axes. His shield was bashed and notched from the blows of maces and flails, of questing blades. His armor was scored and dented from desperate blows that slammed past his guard. When they could not bring down the raging demon in gore-spattered armor, they struck at his black stallion—their blows glancing off chanfron and crinet.

Kane smashed them down as a lion scatters jackals—killing until they dared not close with him, fled before his lethal rush. He was in his element—tireless and implacable as he cut through the milling Sandotneri warriors, strewing the torn earth with broken bodies and smashed steel. Kane's attack was that of a berserker—headlong and unstoppable. Yet a careful observor would note that this was no suicidal frenzy—rather that each movement, each blow and parry was finely calculated by a keen and highly skilled intellect. And that awareness made Kane all the more terrifying to them.

The battle carried southward, toward Meritavano, where the Sandotneri army had camped the night before. Across the wake of dead and wounded, the Sataki foot soldiers followed with gore-clotted poniards and axes. The Sandotneri army, struggling to break out of the Sataki vise, was not merely being decimated; it was being eliminated.

Still in the thick of the fighting, Kane heard the sudden blare of trumpets from the dust beyond. Jarvo was trying to rally his men. Kane smashed down a last mailed foeman—his blunted ax could not penetrate the mail, but the force behind it caved in the man's chest—paused to let his personal guard gather about him. Suddenly the field seemed barren of Sandotneri horsemen.

After a moment reports came back to Kane that Jarvo, leading the last desperate remnants of his heavy cavalry, had managed to disengage Kane's armored troops and cut a retreat through the ring of light horse to the south. Those of the Sandotneri who could follow, turned and fled through the break.

Kane snarled commands, called for his trumpeters to sound pursuit. Kane might have spared his breath. Sensing the kill, his cavalry were already slashing at the heels of the fleeing Sandotneri. It was a day's ride to the safety of the city walls, and it was manifest that Jarvo was without any reserve troops to reinforce his retreat.

Gathering his personal guard to him, Kane plunged after the fugitives—striving to throw out flankers to cut off the exhausted enemy. He galloped past the deserted Sandotneri camp at Meritavano, sourly noting that already his men were more interested in pillage than pursuit. Just to the south of the village, Kane drew rein amidst a milling body of his men.

Pushing through them, Kane rode as close as he dared. A low curse escaped his lips. Men near him heard it, shivered.

The land to the south of Meritavano was an expanse of reedy bog and water-meadow, fed by one of the savannah's buried rivers. Caught between the village and the flanking Sataki cavalry, Jarvo had tried to lead his men

across the water-meadow—looking deceptively solid in this the dry season. Now horses and riders thrashed helplessly in the deep mud—the weight of their mail and armor dragging them beneath the surface of the marsh, leaving them floundering about in the muck, unable to rise and win free to the dry land beyond. On the far side, a dismal few mounts and riders dragged themselves free, staggered off through the tall grass.

"Send the foot soldiers in there," Kane ordered. "Have them strip to the skin, so they won't sink in over their butts. They can use their poniards well enough, I've seen. And bring rope—as much as there is. Salvage what they can of horses and armor, before it all sinks into the morass. And bring me Jarvo—dead or alive."

The Satakis leapt to their muddy slaughter with all the unrestrained zeal of children frolicking in the rain.

They slithered through the marsh until darkness claimed the day and the field. Toward twilight one muck-smeared searcher proudly handed Kane a battered helmet with vizor worked into a snarling demon's mask—pulled out of the scum of a deep pool.

Kane stared out across the darkening morass.

XIII

Siege

King Owrinos of Sandotneri gave a last spasmodic shudder, uttered a great liquid sigh, smiled and lay still. It might have been a delicious stretch and yawn before settling into contented sleep, but his smile was fixed for the ages, and the blood that bubbled from his lips clotted and dried. The king would never again awaken, not even at the shuddering impacts of the massive stones that were pounding his palace into rubble.

His daughter, summoned by the court physicians when the hemorrhage erupted, gazed at the emaciated corpse and shrugged. Owrinos had taken too long in his dying. After so many months of anticipation, his death was only an anticlimax to the impending doom of his besieged city.

"Sandotneri looks to you now, Ridaze," Esketra murmured. "General Ridaze."

From close at hand—a jarring concussion, the tearing rumble of a collapsing wall. Esketra could smell the musty tang of pulverized plaster and brick, hear the distant moans and shouts.

"What's left of it," she amended.

Ridaze's handsome face was grim with concern. "Kane's trebuchets are smashing the outer walls to powder. Esketra, we must take you to a place of safety."

"Lead on," Esketra said dully. "We both know there is no place of safety in Sandotneri."

The city had been stunned when the first panic-stricken riders brought word of their army's defeat at the hands of the Satakis. For the first hours there was disbelief, loud denials as the rumors gobbled about the city streets. Then came the pitiful knots of fugitives—the scattered survivors of the rout, battered and filthy and half-dead from their flight. And the next day brought the victorious Sataki army.

The Satakis sacked the outlying settlements and villas, as Kane took up a position before the city walls. Kane sent emissaries to speak eloquently of the advantages of peaceful surrender. Their arguments failed to persuade —in part because the people of Sandotneri trusted to their walls and to some last minute deliverance from their neighboring kingdoms; in part because, with Owrinos in a coma and Jarvo presumed dead, there was no single personage with authority to surrender the city.

Kane set to work constructing siege engines from the tackle and timber carried in the baggage train. By the next morning his massive trebuchets were bombarding the city with boulders and chunks of masonry, while his sappers mined beneath the walls. Meanwhile, several of his cavalry regiments were detached to escort the unwieldy mass of the Prophet's assault force from Shapeli. Its heavy cavalry destroyed, the beleaguered remnants of Sandotneri's army dared not risk a sortie against Kane's armor.

Kane waited for the city to know it was doomed. He could afford to be patient for a while. He had ample provisions and water for his horses and men, and he was confident that no new army would come to raise the siege. Of those of the southern kingdoms whose holdings bordered on Sandotneri's demesne, certainly no help would be forthcoming. Ripestnari, whose lands bordered San-

dotneri along the Inland Sea, was a traditional enemy; Desdrineli, to the south, was at war on its own western marches and could spare no troops; Vegliari, further to the south, had been laid waste by a long and bloody civil strife and was on the brink of schism: Bavostni, on the Eastern Sea and sharing part of the marches of Shapeli, had only years before lost a bitter territorial war with Sandotneri—and was at present Kane's major outside source of men and equipment.

They would stand by while the Satakis gobbled up Sandotneri. That they were next in the path of the Dark Crusade was a threat too distant to consider. After all, Shapeli was leagues away across the savannah, and certainly Orted Ak-Ceddi would be satisfied when the conquest of Sandotneri secured his borders and restored his military prestige.

And so Kane waited for the mass of assault troops to join him from Shapeli—amusing himself in the interim by bombarding the city. Initially there was answering fire from the city's own defensive engines, but Kane's trebuchets quickly found their range and annihilated them. His design was primarily psychological warfare for the moment, inasmuch as Kane saw no point in breaching the walls before he had the reinforcements to throw into the defenders' fire. His own men were too valuable. Instead Kane was content to demoralize the besieged city with the evidence that his trebuchets could pound their walls and their palace at will. These siege engines were of massive construction, capable of hurling immense weights with deadly accuracy—range being adjusted through the movable weight on the short arm of the pivoted beam, or by shortening the sling on the longer throwing arm.

Nor were all the missiles of stone. In this region surface rock was scarce, but other ammunition was in ready supply. Heavily laden wagons returned from the plundered battlefield. Dead horses were better eating than the Sataki rabble was accustomed to, thus had value. The stripped bodies of the Sandotneri officers could be loaded into a trebuchet sling. They made little impression on the

city's walls, but their effect on the defenders' morale was devastating.

Kane grew bored with the sport. It served to remind him that Jarvo's body had never been found. Spies and deserters from the city reported that the Sandotneri general had not been among the fugitives who limped back to their capital after the disaster at Meritavano.

The defeated general would have found a cold welcome there. Kane's crushing victory had plunged Jarvo's name into disgrace. Jarvo had left the city garrison under the command of his rivals, so that they would not share in the glory of his victory. His artifice had spared their lives, and now they repaid his memory by loudly proclaiming the defeat was entirely due to Jarvo's incompetent leadership.

Owrinos' death left Sandotneri without even a titular monarch. General Ridaze, at the last minute ordered to remain with the city garrison, had been elevated to Jarvo's former position. With Esketra's favor, Ridaze was the uncrowned commander of Sandotneri. It may have been that Ridaze found the sudden realization of his ambitions not so magnificent as he had dreamed.

Kane remembered Ridaze as a capable officer, popular with his men and rather more so with the ladies. Dark, dashing, daring, the romantic ideal of a cavalry officer—but of no particular genius or ability. Ridaze would present no problem; he was out of his depth.

Kane rather wished he knew for certain that Jarvo was safely buried beneath the morass at Meritavano. Kane despised Jarvo as a man, considered him unimaginative as a general—but the man had a certain plodding tenacity that, given the smiles of fortune, made him a dangerous opponent. His swordplay was characteristic: good enough to hold his own against a better man, unaware that he was outclassed, and let his opponent falter but once . . . Kane had seen any number of masters of the blade cut down by stolid journeymen who got lucky when it counted.

The siege wore on tiresomely—Kane unwilling to storm the walls, Ridaze not daring to attempt a sortie. Kane

kept to his pavilion—letting his officers keep his army in order, moodily sipping brandy and considering his next move. In the distance, gouts of dust and splintered masonry exploded intermittently from the ruined palace. Kane brooded upon the destruction. It seemed only a short while ago that he had schemed to discover the secret passageways of that same palace; now he was smashing it to rubble. He always seemed to be smashing at things he could not have.

Kane swore and looked for another bottle of brandy. The familiar depression was getting worse after each battle now. He wondered how much longer the game would continue to amuse him, to stave off the awful weight of centuries from his spirit. The inaction and resultant letdown always made the boredom more intense than before. Kane found himself musing once again upon the Tower of Yslsl. For too many centuries had festered that haunting, deadly temptation . . .

The twilight brought with it two events to rouse him from his sombre mood.

A delegation ventured forth from Sandotneri under flag of truce. General Ridaze wished to discuss terms of honorable surrender.

A dark mass of humanity rolled across the northern horizon. The Sataki horde had come to Sandotneri.

Neither occurrence was unexpected. There was, however, something else that Kane had not been prepared for.

Orted Ak-Ceddi rode at the head of his Dark Crusade.

XIV

Treaties and Evocations

This turn of events did not please Kane. Kane had assumed that the Prophet would remain comfortable and secure in Ceddi, dreaming of the rich plunder his minions would faithfully haul back to his fortress—and more to the point, leave the direction of the Sword of Sataki to Kane.

His presence was ominous. And yet, the evening began quite well for Kane, as such evenings have a way of beginning.

From the shade of his pavilion, Kane leaned back in his chair and dispassionately awaited the approach of the envoys. He had both feet propped upon his campaign table, so that he sighted their anxious faces between his booted toes. The envoys were scared and stiffly formal. Kane wore leather cavalry trousers and a sleeveless aketon he normally wore under his armor, and was drunk enough not to care. Compared to the gallant finery of the Sandotneri envoys, Kane looked like an apish thug. The sardonic intelligence in his eyes left no doubt as to who was master of the situation.

"The siege is at a stalemate," began their leader. "You haven't enough troops to storm our walls. We lack sufficient cavalry to break your siege. Nothing can be gained by us through enduring your bombardment, nor by you through continuing a pointless siege, and thus risking exhausted provisions and attack from our allies."

Kane cut into his speech. "Before you bore me further, I should tell you that my vedettes have already informed me of the approach of a new body of the Prophet's foot soldiers. Since they number past a hundred thousand, you doubtless have observed their advance from Sandotneri's towers. And since that doubtless has provoked this conference, let's have no more nonsense about a stalemate."

"These new 'foot soldiers' are Sataki rabble," sneered the envoy. "I shouldn't have to tell *you* that Sandotneri's walls are well defended."

"Thank you, I know Sandotneri's defenses quite well," Kane said evenly. "And I know my siege engines can breach those walls whenever I command it. You, of course, have never had the misfortune to witness what the Sataki rabble can do to an enemy city once they're within its walls, although I'm certain you've heard countless lurid and grisly tales. I assure you anything you will have heard can be only euphemistic hints as to what you may expect to see before tomorrow's sunset."

The language was overladen with gutturals and always made Kane thirsty. He emptied his goblet with a flourish.

"You bore me," he said expansively. "This siege bores me. I feel inclined to be generous in my terms. Who is empowered to accept them in Sandotneri's behalf?"

The leader of the delegation glanced toward his colleagues, who looked away helplessly. "Until a new king is crowned, Esketra acts as regent, and General Ridaze is her military governor."

Kane nodded, offering them a wolfish smile. "Well then, have Esketra and General Ridaze come to me this evening, and we'll sign a treaty of surrender."

"What terms?" demanded the envoy.

"My terms," Kane told him. "Don't distress yourselves

—I'm inclined to offer the standard terms of honorable surrender. I'll discuss them with your superiors."

He added, cutting off their protests, "If I don't hear from you by nightfall, by tomorrow the Satakis will hold festival in Sandotneri's streets, You won't like their terms at all."

His mood much improved, Kane watched their agitated departure. In a surge of proprietary concern, Kane ordered the barrage to cease, then called for a clerk to draw up articles of surrender as he dictated them. The procedure was nothing out of the ordinary. With the almost continuous state of warfare in the southern kingdoms, the rituals attendant upon victory and defeat had been almost formulized by convention. With the ease of long experience, Kane dealt with cessation of hostilities, surrender of armaments, payment of reparations, secession of territories, recognition of suzerainty, and other such matters as fast as his clerk could copy.

It was a tidy document, not unfair under the circumstances, and Kane was rather pleased with it. They could either sign it or not, and with the Sataki horde converging upon the beleaguered city, he expected they would sign it readily enough. It pleased Kane to have the matter thus neatly concluded without recourse to the Prophet's rabble.

Kane read over the document once the ink was dry, decided the work should serve as a very model for such documents, told his clerk to draw it up in triplicate, and called for his steward to bring a new bottle. By this time the cavalry escort he had detached to fetch the Sataki assault troops was riding into camp—a dark mass of tired men, women and children straggling miles to the rear. As before, the Sataki army was a numberless mass of humanity—driven by zeal and by fear.

Kane ignored the Prophet's horde, until his returning officers reported to him that Orted Ak-Ceddi rode with them. Kane looked toward the slowly advancing sea of bodies that crawled out of the deepening gloom—sensing a vague premonition.

The approach of a large party under flag of truce from Sandotneri cut short his speculation. Even in the

distance, Kane recognized Esketra's tall figure riding side-saddle on a fine cream gelding. He smiled and got up to put on his best brocaded houppelande. Awaiting the delegation, Kane dispatched a messenger to Orted to inform him of the city's imminent surrender. He would conclude this matter quickly, and then discover what had drawn the Prophet out of the safety of his lair.

It was not a cordial reunion, but then Kane had not been on friendly terms with any of them even when he was general of Sandotneri's army. Esketra was manifestly terrified and chose to hide her fear beneath a shaky mask of hauteur. Ridaze was pallid with restrained fury—the corrosive fury of a man who has achieved the pinnacle of his ambitions for no purpose save to be humiliated before a hated rival. The others of their escort seemed to be surreptitiously pondering whether Kane wore mail beneath his houppelande.

Kane dispensed with icy formalities. "I think this is straightforward enough," he told them, proffering the articles of surrender.

The envoy Kane had dealt with previously examined the document, reading it aloud to Esketra and her general. Stone faces, pressed lips, angry eyes condemned prisoners listening as the judge proclaims their sentence.

"Impossible!" growled Ridaze.

Kane raised an eyebrow. "Nonsense. Basically the same terms we offered Bavostni four years ago. It only pinches when it's your neck that's in the noose."

The twilight was deepening. Kane gestured toward the darker sea of bodies that was even now encircling the city walls. They couldn't see their faces in the distance, but they could hear the dread Sataki war chants that roared from uncounted thousands of throats.

"If you think I demand too costly tribute, imagine for yourselves what all those grubby hands will find to grasp when they loot Sandotneri on the morrow. So long as you adhere to these terms, I guarantee you your lives and safety. Once the mob breaks through, I won't even guarantee you a clean death."

They hesitated, but Kane knew it was only a last

minute denial of the inevitable. They knew they must accept his terms, else neither Esketra nor Ridaze would have ridden into Kane's camp.

"You will note," Kane pointed out, "that the treaty acknowledges Esketra as Owrinos' heir and Ridaze as her chief minister—subject, of course, to the sovereignty of Ingoldi."

"Puppet rule!" spat Esketra.

"That has an ugly sound," purred Kane. "Think of yourself as a titular monarch. There are worse ways to dangle from a string than as a puppet."

"For the welfare of Sandotneri, I suggest we sign," spoke Ridaze stoutly. Their present position was untenable, and Kane's terms did guarantee their nominal rule. Later the situation might change, and a treaty was only a scrap of parchment.

Kane watched their reluctant signatures, then signed his own name with a flourish and stamped the document with the sigil of Sataki. A fine piece of work, he reflected, and neatly concluded.

"It's grown dark," Kane observed. "I think some refreshment to honor the occasion. I've directed my steward to set out a cold dinner for us. We can wait within my pavilion while your envoys proclaim the signing of our treaty to the city."

"I do not care to accept any further hospitalities from you," Esketra told him coldly.

"I'm sorry—did you think that was an invitation?" The menace cut through Kane's urbanity. "It wasn't. You two are my guests until I've seen how well the citizens of Sandotneri honor our new treaty. I hope your envoys will be persuasive."

With icy grace they retired into Kane's pavilion, where a light supper was being laid. Kane gave certain orders to his men, dispatched a second messenger to the Prophet to inform him of the formal surrender, then joined his unwilling guests.

It bothered Kane that he did not share the exultant spirits of his chief officers, as they gathered about to celebrate the surrender. An outsider might have mistaken

Kane for one of the defeated parties, for his distracted and brooding aspect as the evening wore on. Kane was not in doubt as to the source of his unease: Orted Ak-Ceddi. What was the Prophet doing here? And why had he not yet communicated with Kane?

To this point all of Kane's cunningly laid plans had worked to perfection—the signed treaty making Kane virtual master of Sandotneri was the successful fulfillment of but the first phase in his grand design. There was reason for jubilation, but Orted's unexpected presence here only reminded Kane that the Prophet was still an unknown factor.

Kane had gone to pains to discover all he could of Orted Ak-Ceddi. He knew that for all his pose as a popular hero and champion of the downtrodden, Orted the bandit chieftain had been a ruthless outlaw who left a wake of murder and rapine wherever his band passed through. Precisely what hold Orted had on the obscure cult of Sataki—or vice versa—was an enigma to Kane. Basically Kane saw Orted as a cunning opportunist who had seized the role of Prophet of Sataki as a guise to cloak his mass-scale depredations under the pretense of religious crusade. Mass power through mass hysteria—the rank and file proud to die for the glory of the holy cause; the elite content to reap the power and the wealth paid for with the blood of the faithful.

It was a familiar story. Kane saw nothing in Orted that would indicate the bandit-turned-prophet was anything beyond the characteristic pattern. Orted was crafty and rapacious; no question. Orted had a good command of guerilla tactics and mob violence, but lacked any competency with regard to waging a full-scale war against a disciplined foe; that was where Kane came in. Orted thought enough of his own well-being to let his minions do the work and run the risks, while he stayed home in luxury and security, and contemplated the fruits of their labors; this last was *why* Kane had interceded. Why then was Orted here? Had Kane misjudged him? It would bring matters to a head too soon, if Orted chose to take an active command of the Sword of Sataki.

Perhaps, Kane mused, the Prophet had deemed the situation well in hand, determined he could safely come to witness the triumph of his new army. But that would indicate a grandstand play, full of pomp and bombast. Orted had come unannounced. An inner voice whispered to Kane that he had somewhere made an error. The eldritch chanting of the Sataki horde seemed to underscore his gnawing doubt. Despite his earlier resolve to taper off, Kane found himself drinking toast for toast with his officers.

Hoofbeats again approached the pavilion. Curb chains jangled, and Kane waited expectantly—sensing a new tension from the sentries without. Then deeper blobs of blackness crowded the shadow beneath the awning outside. Followed by several of his priests, Orted Ak-Ceddi strolled through the doorway of the pavilion.

The Prophet had taken time to wash off the dust of travel before joining them, and he made an impressive entrance. His brown mane hung in precise perfumed coils, and his leonine features were languid beneath a cushion of dissipation. He wore tight leather trousers and blouse-sleeved shirt of black silk, with the gold sigil of Sataki dangling beneath the open throat. Orted favored them with a smile of sardonic amusement, and for an instant his eyes locked with Kane's.

They made an eerie study in contrasts, these two men who led the Dark Crusade. Orted, lean-hipped and broad-shouldered, pantherish in movement and strength. For all the months of debauchery there remained steel beneath the soft veneer of fat and the perfumed foppery. Behind him stood his black-robed priests, faces half-hidden beneath their cowls. Kane, barrel-chested and massive of limb, ogreish in strength and cat-quick for all his size. There was demonic intelligence in his coarse-featured face, and despite his apparent relaxed posture, Kane exuded menace. Behind Kane ranged his major officers—hard faces wary, casually shifting goblets so that swordhands were free.

Between them, Esketra and Ridaze, sensing the sudden tension—their aloof faces drawn with uncertainty.

Orted's black eyes hold the gaze of Kane's blue eyes. Eyes dark with cosmic evil: eyes that blazed with azure murder-lust. The secret touch of an elder god: the Mark of Kane. Orted broke the gaze, and broke the tableau.

"Orted Ak-Ceddi, Prophet of Sataki," Kane made needless introduction. "Esketra of Sandotneri and General Ridaze. I trust my aides have informed you that we have just formalized the treaty of surrender."

Kane gestured toward the document displayed on the map table. Orted's eyes glanced upon it casually, then darted back to rest upon Esketra. Esketra gave him a haughty smile, but her eyes were coolly speculative.

"Yes, General Kane. They informed me." Orted held out his hand, and a priest brought him the document. Carelessly the Prophet read through it. "Yes, everything seems in order."

It was a good effect, although Kane knew the former bandit was illiterate. Orted returned the parchment to the priest.

"I hadn't realized you were empowered to make treaties, Kane," he remarked, signing for a steward to bring him a goblet.

"As general of your army, such is understood," Kane said suavely. "After all, decisions have to be made in the field, and you scarcely can spare time to have my couriers forever at your heels in Ceddi, trying to haggle over various trivial issues. Of course, every agreement I undertake is subject to your approval."

"Of course. Such is understood," Orted agreed. "You know how well I trust your good judgment."

The Prophet gulped down his brandy. "This is quite good. I'll have more." He glanced about the richly furnished pavilion, as the steward refilled his goblet "Don't go too far," he admonished. Behind him, his priests stood aloof and motionless as shadows of the dead.

"Well, Kane," Orted said, wiping his chin on his sleeve. "You've done very well for yourself here. I'm extremely pleased with what you've accomplished so far. You and your men have performed great works for the glory of Sataki. You have destroyed the army of

Sandotneri, captured the city, and taken only moderate casualties in your victory. I congratulate you."

"Thank you," acknowledged Kane, every nerve straining to catch the menace he knew lurked behind Orted's brandied smile.

"You have, however, made one error in this," the Prophet spoke with deceptive grace. "To be sure, I don't fault you for it. You were acting as best you understood."

How much has the fool guessed? Kane's expression was blandly inquisitive. From his hand to his knife hilt to Orted's heart would be but a blurred instant.

"An error?"

"Yes. Sandotneri has twice defied the Dark Crusade. Sandotneri has massacred untold thousands of the Children of Sataki."

The Prophet's voice suddenly oozed with venom. "There can be no peace with Sandotneri! For these sins they must die!"

From out of the night, the throbbing chant of the Satakis—rising ever higher for these last moments—abruptly was stilled. Vaguely then, the keening moan as of a distant cold wind through skeletal trees. It was as if a hundred thousand throats raised one shrill scream of horror beneath a smothering shroud of leaden mist.

A shiver of indescribable ecstasy veiled the Prophet's eyes.

The muffled death-cry of a city rose to a banshee howl. Terror ravened the night, and those who heard knew that death had unveiled its face.

"You devil!" Ridaze snarled.

Lunging for the doorway, Kane saw what he intended, but made no move to interfere. The others were entranced by the tocsin of dread that shattered the night.

Ridaze drew a poniard from the sleeve of his doublet. In one desperate leap, he flung himself upon the enthralled Prophet, stabbed the needle-like blade into his heart.

Kane exulted in that instant, knowing that even if Orted wore mail, that enraged blow would drive the poniard between the metal rings.

Orted staggered. The triangular blade snapped; its broken tip sprang away across the tent.

Ridaze recoiled, his face slack with disbelief. No trace of blood showed on the pierced silk.

Orted ignored him—even as the priests instantly swarmed over Ridaze. A rush of black robes, flashing grey blades, then gushing crimson. Ridaze sagged to the ground, disbelief still written in his dead face.

Kane spun past them—it was over in an instant—still following his initial impetus toward the doorway. Within the tent Esketra screamed brokenly, his officers blundered after him, the priests stood clustered about the laughing Prophet.

The night was starless black. Kane could could see the circle of torches where the Satakis ringed the city. Where Sandotneri's towers and walls should rise, the others saw nothing at all. No light. No towers. Nothing but absolute darkness.

Kane, whose eyes pierced the darkness as keenly as ever his mother's, saw the dancing shadow horde that writhed, sated, away from silent Sandotneri and into the starless gulf of night.

XV

Omen

Daylight dissolved the pall of night and unveiled a city of the dead. No assault, no plague, nor poison could have wreaked such wholesale annihilation of human life. Kane, riding at dawn through the murdered city, thought of the ravages of poison gas—although he knew too well that no such mundane death had claimed these victims.

The dead lay everywhere—grey, contorted faces, eyes stark with horror, tongues swollen and protruding, limbs frozen in final convulsions. Soldiers sprawled upon the ramparts, children crumpled beside their toys, merchants slumped across their wares, mothers fallen over their dead infants. In street, or household, or tavern, or bastion, or alley, or stall . . .

For one dread instant, the portals of the dark world had yawned, and something alien and evil had crept forth—and feasted.

Now the Satakis swarmed like maggots throughout the corpse of Sandotnen—despoiling the dead, pillaging the silent shops and houses, stripping weapons and armor that had been no defense against elder horror. Comman-

deered wagons groaned beneath the weight of the plunder, broad peasant backs bent from sacks of loot. The wealth of Sandotneri was being stripped from the corpse, dragged off piecemeal for the forests of Shapeli.

Kane, inured to such scenes and to such horrors, nonetheless appeared depressed as he rode to meet Orted Ak-Ceddi. The Prophet gazed about him with the smug satisfaction of an artist who views his own masterwork. Kane had seen nothing of Orted in the chaotic hours since the Prophet and his retinue had swept out of Kane's pavilion, taking the terror-stricken Esketra with them. Kane had spent the remaining hours of the night deep in thought, while the Satakis rioted in triumph through the city of the dead, and Kane's officers attempted to maintain order amongst the men.

From time to time, throughout the night, Kane called to him certain of his men whom he knew he could trust, spoke with them in hushed council. Some departed that night on missions known only to themselves and to Kane.

By dawn, his spirits somewhat improved, Kane mounted Angel and rode into the city, where men told him he might find Orted Ak-Ceddi. Kane found him, smiling benediction upon the revels of his followers.

"Your face is grim this morning, General Kane," greeted the Prophet. "Surely the vision of massacre does not appall you."

"The massacre was needless," Kane replied. "The city had surrendered to us."

"Surrendered to you, Kane," the Prophet reminded him. "Not to me."

"I had signed a treaty."

"And the treaty was disregarded. There is no novelty in that. Surely nothing about the deed can blacken the name of Kane."

Kane glanced sharply at Orted, wondering how deep the mockery might lie.

"No, Kane—don't scowl so. You have done as you promised, and I am well pleased with you. You have forged a true sword for Sataki, and you have wielded it gloriously against the enemies of the faithful. You under-

stand war and its waging to perfection, Kane—but you cannot understand the sacred mission of the Dark Crusade. You are a sword, Kane—and as you once told me, a sword has no soul. Your duty is to conquer the enemies of Sataki, Kane. What I choose to do with the conquered enemy is according to the will of Sataki. Don't concern yourself with matters beyond your understanding—and beyond your authority."

Orted paused, gestured at the windrows of slain defenders along the wall. "Word of the doom that befell Sandotneri will speed like a blight throughout the southern kingdoms. Sandotneri defied the Dark Crusade; Sandotneri is no more. I think, Kane, Sandotneri's fate is a warning that will serve you well—when you lead the Sword of Sataki across the southern kingdoms."

"I have no doubt the warning will be understood," replied Kane, meeting the dark glow of the Prophet's eyes.

"Very well then." Orted grinned without humor. "I believe Ripestnari is the next obstacle in our path."

"When it falls, the other border kingdoms will probably capitulate without resistance," Kane agreed.

"Then see that Ripestnari falls," Orted dismissed him. "You understand your duty."

"Perfectly," said Kane.

XVI

Broken Sword

The dead man in the grass made a hoarse, gobbling croak as the dingo sank its teeth into his leg.

It startled the dingo. The wild dog had been eating human carrion for the past week. Not once had its meal offered protest. Ears taut, it regarded the dead man suspiciously in the dying light.

The noise subsided, save for a low rattling moan. Emboldened, the dingo took a firmer grip on the bare leg.

This time the dead thing gave a bellow like a bull sinking beneath quicksand, thrashed its filthy limbs in aimless paroxysms.

The cry brought an answering shout from the billabong close by. A running body pushed through the grass, coming toward the kicking dead thing. There was easier prey than this, and the dingo took to its heels.

Cautiously the girl approached the moaning thing in the tall grass, her poniard glinting with the last rays of the sun.

"What is it, Erill?" came a shout from the wagon drawn up beside the billabong.

"It's a man, Boree!" she answered. "Alive, I think."

With a curse, the older woman caught up an ax and loped toward her. "Don't touch him!"

The man was naked, except for a torn jupon, coated with old blood and dried filth. His bare limbs were cracked and blistered from the sun, lacerated from the saw-bladed grass. Beneath a crust of muck and caked scum, a number of old wounds festered under foul scabs, and bright blood oozed from the bite on his leg.

He made a mewing sound, and wriggled brokenly toward the near by waterhole. If he was aware of their presence, he gave no sign. A faint trail of bent grass indicated the man had been crawling for some distance—evidently his last strength had failed just before he could reach the water he sought.

Boree made a thick sound in her throat. "It's a soldier, from the great battle."

"Ours or theirs?" Erill wondered.

"Who cares. Best to put the poor bastard out of his misery, and have done." Boree hefted the ax.

"No!" Erill protested sharply. "He doesn't appear badly wounded. Maybe he only needs water."

"Needs a lot more than that, honey. Could be all busted up inside. Hell, what are you going to do?"

The smaller girl bent to tug at the man's shoulders. "Give a hand here, Boree. We'll drag him down to the pool. I've seen tooo much of death."

"Then one more shouldn't bother you," grunted Boree. "Here, give me his shoulders, and I'll pull him. You grab hold his feet. If anything's busted, he's past caring."

She cursed as she raised the man's shoulders. "Hell, honey. He won't want to live even if he has the say. Half his face is all chewed up."

"Boree, will you just shut up and pull."

Straining, for the man was thickly built, and a limp body is a difficult weight to manage, the two women stumbled to drag him to their camp. Days before, their wagon had been part of the Sataki horde that converged upon Sandotneri—not so much from their zeal for the Dark Crusade, as because to remain behind might be

construed as disloyalty to Sataki, and disloyalty did not escape the notice of the Defenders of Sataki. Now, returning from the plundered city, a lame horse had detached them from the straggling horde. By degrees they followed apart from the main body, returning to Ingoldi because there was no other place to go.

Erill had pondered the idea of fleeing to the south. But now that Sandotneri had fallen, the Sword of Sataki rode like a destroying wind across the southern kingdoms. The Dark Crusade was engulfing the land, and there was no place to flee. And so they slowly made their way back to the forests of Shapeli, camped here tonight with another day's wagon journey to go.

Gingerly they laid the man down at the water's edge. He had barely strength enough to gulp a few mouthfuls of water, then lapsed once more into unconsciousness. Erill stripped off the tattered jupon and began to lave the filth from his tortured flesh. The man lay senseless throughout her ministrations, even when she scrubbed against his encrusted wounds.

Boree, who had gone on with cooking their dinner, came over to see if he still lived. She shook her head, then scowled, squinting in the failing light.

"That's an old wound there on his face. It's all scar."

"Looks like an old burn scar," Erill commented. "I don't think he's badly wounded—mostly thirst and exhaustion."

"And fever," Boree remarked. "Burned up with fever. That'll kill him, even if he doesn't get blood poisoning from these wounds."

"They're not deep—only look bad because they've festered," Erill told her. "And there's awful bruises all around them."

"Crush injuries," Boree judged. "Likely then he wore armor. Unless you slip past a joint, takes a hell of a lot to bash through steel plate."

They looked down at the unconscious face, its scarred half unnaturally pallid against the fever-flushed skin of the right. It would have been a handsome face.

"Erill, do you know who this is!" Boree breathed suddenly.

"Yes."

"Erill, that's Jarvo! It has to be!"

"I know. I guessed it when we picked him up."

Boree licked her thick lips. "There's one huge bounty on him. Alive or dead."

"We'll keep him alive," Erill told her. "If we can."

"Bounty's the same."

"We aren't keeping him for any bounty."

"No bounty?" Boree tried to see the joke.

"We'll hide him, nurse him back to health."

"Erill, are you out of your mind!"

"No." Erill's face was as hard as her voice. "Once the Satakis used me as a tool to destroy a city. Now I'm going to salvage a sword to destroy the Dark Crusade."

"Oh, Erill," murmured Boree. "Oh, Erill."

XVII

Children's Hour

"Noochee! Noochee! Noochee!"

Jarvo spun around at the jeering shouts of the children, saw that they only played along the alley. He relaxed, then uneasily glanced about to see if anyone had taken note of his guilty start.

"Noochee! Noochee!" A whimper, then shrieks of laughter.

Noochee. He was an *inuchiri*—or *noochee*, as current slang had foreshortened it. There were only two kinds of people left in the world: the Satakis and the inuchiri—literally, "those who betray the one faith". As easy to say, the living and the dead—for where the Dark Crusadé cast its shadow, there were no alternatives.

Jarvo froze, in the next instant tried to look nonchalant. Across the street, two guardsmen in red surcoats emblazoned with the black avellan cross of Sataki—uniform of the Defenders of Sataki, the Prophet's security police. Were they only lounging there, or were they watching him?

They might wonder why the cry of "noochee" had

brought him about. Feigning mild curiosity, Jarvo continued his movement and strolled over to where the children laughed and played at the mouth of the alley. Glancing from the corner of his good eye, he saw the red-coated Defenders leisurely cross toward him. For a moment Jarvo considered bolting down the alley. Two things held him back. First, that would confirm their suspicions, bring out their shrill whistles to signal a noochee chase. Second, the alley was a dead end.

Jarvo gazed into the darkened alleyway, as if curious to see what sport the children found here. For a moment the darkness hid the far end, then his eye adjusted to the gloom.

At the far end, the children had nailed together an X-shaped framework of scrap timber, in imitation of the avellan cross of Sataki. A girl—she couldn't be much past six—hung upside down from the framework, her scrawny body straining against the inexpertly hammered nails. Her face was distorted from agony and bruises, and her mindless whimpers barely carried past the alley mouth.

"Noochee! Noochee!" shrilled the pack of children, squealing and darting from the mouth of the alley, pelting her with bits of offal and debris. A chance hit might provoke a new bleat of pain.

"Noochee! Noochee! Noochee!"

Jarvo started forward, felt a hand grip his shoulder. He whirled. In sick loathing he had forgotten the two Defenders.

"No problem, friend," one of them grinned. "It's a sure enough noochee brat. We arrested her family the other night, but the kids only flushed her out of hiding this morning."

"Thought they'd set up their own little Justice Square, just like the grown-ups," his comrade chuckled. "Crazy the way kids will pick things up."

"Been watching them all morning," the first guardsman added. "Gives a few of the grown-ups a start now and then. Just like it did you. But just a noochee brat."

Jarvo grinned crookedly. The Defenders were staring at him, and in a way that let him know what might be

suspected of passers-by who sought to interfere with a noochee execution. He felt his belly tighten. There was a poniard hidden in his boot—in the interest of public safety, the Prophet had decreed that private citizens could not go armed except when on crusade. The Defenders wore steel helmets and hauberks, and went heavily armed. If their scrutiny penetrated Erill's paints and waxes, there was no question of fighting it out.

"What's your name, friend?" the first one asked.

"Insiemo," Jarvo answered, giving the identity Erill had coached him to assume.

"Face like yours I ought to remember. Where you from?"

"The Theatre Guild. I mostly work on sets and stuff, don't go out too much."

"Where you headed, Insiemo?"

"Got a break. Going for a drink."

"What happened to your face?"

"I was part of the first wave that went over the wall at Emleoas."

"Yeah? The west wall, huh." Casually spoken.

"No." Jarvo sensed the trap. "The west wall was the river wall—not even enough mud there to stand a ladder on. We went up over the east wall, after we'd laid down a sharp fire from the ridge there. I got to the parapet just in time to miss the flaming pitch that cleaned off the ladder beneath me. Well, I missed most of the pitch."

"One of the first bunch, huh." There was a trace of respectful sympathy. "Well, I guess I can't blame you for not walking around in public much."

"It'd look worse without the wax and greasepaint," Jarvo volunteered.

"I'd noticed you were sort of made up."

"Got it!" The other guardsman, silent during the questioning, smacked his fist into his palm. "Jarvo!"

Jarvo froze, his face doubly a mask.

"Huh?" the first one blurted.

"Yeah, sure! Jarvo!" exclaimed his comrade, pleased with himself. "This is the guy who plays Jarvo in the

new pageant the guild is putting on this month: *The Invincible March of the Sword of Sataki.* I caught it on three nights already."

"I haven't seen it yet."

"You'd better. It's the best one yet."

"I didn't think anyone would recognize me out of costume," Jarvo commented lamely, hoping his voice wouldn't stumble over commonplaces.

"Wouldn't have guessed it if you hadn't mentioned you were from the Theatre Guild. Guess with that scarface, you were tailored for the part. Not really tall enough though, but that don't matter much up on stage."

"Well, I'd better get that drink before I have to get back on the job," Jarvo suggested. "Give a cheer next time you're in the audience."

"Yeah, sure. It's a great pageant. The Theatre Guild may not turn out weapons or armor, but you guys still really do your part for the Crusade. I've gone back to the barracks every night after seeing this new one, thinking I ought to join up with the Sword of Sataki and share in the glory."

"Well, the Defenders of Sataki have an essential duty to perform, too," Jarvo said, edging away.

"You said it, Insicmo. Only thing is, we never get the cheers those cavalrymen do when they ride by."

Jarvo made a sympathetic grunt, escaped for the shelter of a corner tavern. It had been a bad idea, after all, to venture alone into the streets of Ingoldi. Erill would be furious with him. But after too many weeks of inaction, skulking around Erill's wagon in the Theatre Guild, Jarvo had to get out on his own, or lose his mind. Conscious that they were still watching him —the Defenders of Sataki watched everything—he ambled into the tavern.

He hadn't been thirsty before, but now his mouth felt gummy. Javo called for a stoup of ale, found it so expensive he wondered if he had enough money. He paid for it with bright, new-minted coins that had the sigil of Sataki stamped on one face and the profile of Orted Ak-Ceddi on the other. The coins purported to be silver,

but clattered like they were mostly tin. The Prophet melted down into bullion the gold and silver his conquests brought him, ostensibly to mint his coinage—increasingly debased as the precious metals went into the vaults of Ceddi and to supply the Sword of Sataki. The taverner looked unhappy with the new coins, but the two Defenders lounged only a few yards away, and it was not wise to complain.

Carrying his ale, Jarvo crossed to a bench in the shadow of the wall, where he could look out through the open window. A taste of the ale proved it had been watered. Jarvo sipped it without protest. The commonroom was virtually deserted.

Fear. It haunted the faces of every person on the street. Serve Sataki or die, that was the law. It was written on walls and banners throughout the city, throughout Shapeli. Probably throughout what was left of the southern kingdoms, for each week brought news of yet another smashing victory for Kane and the Sword of Sataki. The Prophet said he would impose the law throughout the entire world. Maybe he would.

Jarvo sipped his tepid ale, stared at the painted mural on the tavern wall. It depicted Orted Ak-Ceddi leading his heroic followers in the first great battle of the Guild Fair. Sabres gory with the blood of the helpless townsfolk, the rat-faced thugs of the city guard cowered and tried to flee. Jarvo turned again to the window.

Fear. The Satakis either destroyed or assimilated everything in the path of the Dark Crusade. There was no middle ground. You pledged your soul to Sataki, and joined the triumphant horde. Or you defied Sataki, and joined the even greater horde of the dead. But vigilance was needed to make certain Sataki's newly pledged faithful were not secretly inuchiri. A man might lie to save his skin, thinking he could escape on another day. The Defenders of Sataki kept a constant guard against such treachery. Disloyalty to Sataki meant certain and hideous death—in Justice Square, or in the secret cellars beneath Ceddi.

Noochees hid everywhere. They plotted against the

Dark Crusade. They spoke blasphemies against Sataki. They whispered treason against Orted Ak-Ceddi. When the Prophet commanded that his faithful must labor on some great project for the common good, the noochees grumbled. When the Prophet collected the booty of his conquests from the faithful to buy more soldiers and armaments for the common defense, the noochees complained. When the Prophet demanded that the faithful learn the chants and rituals of Sataki, the noochees showed no zeal. It was well that the Defenders of Sataki were so adept at ferreting out noochees.

Jarvo decided not to press his luck further. He'd proven to himself that he could walk through Ingoldi with impunity. It was time for other things now.

As he left the tavern, the hopeless moan from the alley suddenly rose to a piercing note of agony, cutting through the howls and laughter of the children. Jarvo saw smoke leaking from the alley mouth, and thought for but an instant that he only smelled burning refuse.

"Crazy damn kids!" The two Defenders pounded for the alleyway. "Burn the whole damn city down, if you aren't careful!"

"Noochee! Noochee!"

XVIII

Dream and Delirium

When Erill was angry, her eyes narrowed and flashed as bright and green as the band of jade beads across her brow. Right now she was angry.

"Damn you, Jarvo! I've warned you not to go out on your own yet! And what do you do but blunder into two Defenders first thing!"

She *was* mad. She made it her rule to call him Insiemo always—against making a slip sometime when other ears might hear and wonder.

"I've been cooped up here for months," Jarvo shot back. "Damn it, woman! I'm grateful for all you've done, but I'm not going to stay forever hidden under your bed, while Esketra suffers hell in that devil's harem!"

Erill set her jaw and squinted harder. "Damn it all, I don't care what in hell you do to risk your own bloody neck! Can't you get it through your thick skull that if you screw up, they'll trace you back to us here—and we'll all make a farewell performance on the scaffolds in Justice Square!"

That cut, because he'd realized it beforehand, and had taken the chance nonetheless.

"I'm sorry, Erill," Jarvo muttered, subsiding before her anger. "You've run a hell of a risk for my sake, and I've no right to put you and Boree and all your friends in danger. But, damn it, I can't keep hiding out here without doing anything. When I think of what Esketra has to endure . . . "

Erill cursed herself, scowling at him. She had been crazy as hell to let him find out his Great Love was alive, languishing in silks and furs in the Prophet's tower in Ceddi. His spirits were at such a low ebb after he'd learned that Sandotneri was no more than a city of ghosts. She'd told him of Esketra's captivity in desperate hope that he might shake off the black mood that gnawed at his soul more ravenously than any fever. It had brought Jarvo out of his melancholia well enough—and ever since he paced about restlessly, concocting mad schemes to rescue Esketra from the Prophet's fortress. While in delirium he had cried out Esketra's name again and again, and now that he was whole, he still spoke of her constantly. Erill found herself hating a woman she had never seen.

She broke her stony silence. "Look, there's some things I've got to take care of. Will you promise me to stay around the guild until I get back?"

"I won't even step out of the wagon to piss," Jarvo growled.

She left without farewells, and Jarvo didn't look up. In a foul mood, he told himself he shouldn't feel guilty. Erill was, after all, gutter-bred and gutter-raised. She had saved his life at the risk of hers, and he was grateful. But Erill was too lowborn to understand the needs and the duties that honor demanded of nobility, just as she was too coarse-natured to conceive of a love as deep and unselfish as the love he bore for Esketra. Erill and her friends had done much for him, and Jarvo felt the same lofty gratitude that any great lord extends to his loyal retainers.

It could be no more than that. It must be no more than that.

Jarvo retained only a foggy impression of those first fever-racked weeks. He had lain inside the wagon, somewhere between coma and delirium, while Erill forced him to swallow broths and eucalyptus teas and elixirs of cinchona bark and other powders that Boree procured. All the while they camped beside the waterhole, fearing to move him until his fever broke. Other stragglers from the Sataki horde passed by their camp. When any questioned, Erill explained that the stricken man was her lover, one Insiemo, sorely wounded in the great battle at Meritavano. No one questioned further. There were thousands so wounded, many with faces wrapped in bandages as was brave Insiemo's.

After several days, there were periods when Jarvo remained conscious long enough to gaze upon the wagon interior, the blonde girl who anxiously attended to him, the dark-haired older women whose pocked face always scowled. Gradually the mists of delirium lifted enough for him to understand his situation. It was then that his despair tortured him more cruelly than any fever.

Jarvo remembered the battle, the hopeless realization of defeat, the desperate attempt to rally his routed forces, the final horror when the headlong retreat was dragged down to hell in the treacherous mire below Meritavano. The memories tortured him still, waking or delirious.

Exhausted from the battle, racked with agonizing wounds beneath his dented armor, it had taken some moments before he realized the full horror of their doomed rout onto the marsh. The tall grass was suddenly high reeds; the firm sod was bottomless mud. His horse wallowed in the hidden mire, throwing Jarvo over its neck and into the clinging morass. Helpless in his heavy armor, Jarvo could not rise from the slippery muck. His struggles only dragged him deeper into the sucking depths of the bog. In a burst of panic, Jarvo knew he was going to be pulled beneath the fen by the weight of his armor that scum and foetid slime would trickle through the vizor of his armet, drowning him in filth as he sank within his steel casket into the bottomless morass.

Then unseen hands pulled desperately at his sinking body. Frantic fingers unclasped his demon-mask helmet, flung it off his head. Troopers of his light horse, less encumbered in their mail hauberks, had crawled out to him. Loyal to death, they worked frenziedly to drag their leader out of his armored coffin. It was a tense struggle, as arrows fell upon them from the Sataki pursuers massed on the dry ground. Finally, exhausted and weak as a newborn infant, and nearly as naked, Jarvo sprawled on his belly in the churned mud, gasping for air.

Some of his men were struggling to the far bank of the water-meadow, dragging themselves wearily through the high grass in hope of flight. Jarvo knew Kane would send his cavalry to skirt the marsh, cut off their retreat. There was no escape from that quarter, nor could he remain where he was. Better to drown in the fen than fall into Kane's hands.

There was one desperate chance, and Jarvo took it. Slithering across the muck like some ungainly salamander, he began to work his way through the marsh—following the course of the reed-buried river, away from the sounds of massacre. All was confusion behind him, as Satakis crawled out to slaughter the mired calvarymen. Swimming through scum-covered pools, slithering between the high reeds, Jarvo was well beyond the circle of slaughter by the time darkness concealed hunters and hunted, slayers and slain.

The following days were a confused haze that Jarvo remembered with no more clarity than the first days he spent in Erill's wagon. Exhaustion and the agony of festering wounds were a constant torment—until fever blotted out all other sensation. He remembered drinking from foetid pools in a vain effort to quench his searing thirst, devouring raw the snakes and frogs and blind crawling things that were all he could catch to eat. He remembered the torturing bites and stings of myriads of insects, the blistering touch of the sun. Once a queen snake coiled before him; its bite would bring merciful oblivion, but instead he killed it with a rock and ate it.

Jarvo supposed he was quite mad for much of that

time. Beyond his immediate need to escape, he was never certain what plans he may have had. At first there was the need to return to Sandotneri, but that was impossible with Kane's certain siege, and at some deeper level Jarvo knew Sandotneri must fall after his disastrous defeat. At times, when he could rally his thoughts at all, it seemed to Jarvo he must instead go to Ingoldi—that the only way to expiate his disgrace was to seek out Kane there and kill him. Only rarely did his dream of vengeance remember to take in Orted Ak-Ceddi as well. After several more days of aimless wandering in a northward direction, the only thing Jarvo could remember to concentrate on was the need to escape capture. And finally that awareness dissolved as well. There followed an indefinable interval of pain-haunted blackness that ended finally as his fevered vision began to focus on Erill's face.

By the time Jarvo could feed himself, or endure an hour without dripping with fever-sweat or shaking with chill, he had grown a heavy straw-colored beard. With the patches of scar tissue, the beard gave him a decidedly mangy appearance, but it would be more days still before he would care. By then Erill had passed on to him such information as she dared give him as to the fate of Sandotneri. Jarvo lay in dull despair, wondering why he had been spared. More than ever he swore vengeance on Kane.

It was in this bleak mood he learned from Erill that Esketra yet lived -carried off by the Prophet to serve his will in Ceddi. Jarvo was silent for many hours thereafter. When he spoke again it was with a new calmness, for he had a use for life once more. He would return to Ingoldi with Erill and Boree, and there bide his time for the opportunity to rescue Esketra.

It could be done, of that Jarvo was certain. To believe otherwise was a torture beyond any enduring. All that remained was to study the problem, bide his time until he found a way. True, Esketra had been false to him. But he could forgive her that, knowing that her heart would be his once more, when he daringly stole her away from

the Prophet's citadel. Their world was no more; their love would be a new world.

Thereafter he filled his days with a thousand mad schemes. He would storm the citadel with a secret army. He would organize a rebellion. He would burst upon Orted in his tower, cut him to pieces as Esketra watched with glowing eyes. He would steal into the citadel by night, spirit her away with the audacity of a master thief. He would set a trap for Kane, overpower him in an epic duel —sparing Kane's life while he forced him to procure Esketra's release.

The plans and variations were beyond number, ranging from vaguely feasible to hopelessly fanciful. They each ended with the same vision of triumph and bliss. Erill listened patiently to most of them, occasionally offering sarcastic comment. Whether from bitter tonics or airy hopes, the fever at length gave way, and Jarvo's strength returned.

They had to return to Shapeli—or risk being hunted down as inuchiri by the Sataki patrols that passed about them increasingly, as Kane led the Sword of Sataki ever onward into the southern kingdoms. Erill had originally planned no further than to try to nurse Jarvo back to health, then help him escape to wherever he might muster a new army to lead against Kane. By the time he was strong enough to leave, she found herself rather wishing he would stay. Her protests to his insistence in going to Ingoldi lacked vehemence.

After all, there was no place of safety from the Dark Crusade. Moreover, General Jarvo was by now presumed to be worm-meat beneath the marshes—and even should he have somehow escaped that day, was there any place a less likely refuge than Ingoldi? Finally, Jarvo was going to Ingoldi. If Erill would take him in her wagon, that was fine. If not, he would get there on his own.

So Erill brought him to Ingoldi. On his own, she knew he would never survive. Jarvo laughed at her fears. Erill held her temper, warned him that he had no conception of what awaited them in the Prophet's capital. Jarvo

laughed again. Like much of laughter, it was born of ignorance.

A carnival wagon with two women and a maimed veteran does not excite immediate suspicion, even in Shapeli. Erill took measures to insure such suspicions might never fall—for the Defenders of Sataki were eternally vigilant, and seldom did they scruple over distinctions between whispered suspicion and veritable guilt.

Jarvo became Insiemo, a loyal follower of Sataki whose face had been scarred at Emleoas. His old wounds kept him from serving in the Sword of Sataki, but he had joined the Sataki horde that had called down the doom that engulfed Sandotneri. Old wounds had flared anew on his return from Sandotneri. Erill had met him then, offered the shelter of her wagon to the stricken hero, and they had become lovers after a fashion. Boree had sneered at this; Jarvo agreed the charade would lull suspicion. Humanitarian gestures were suspect in Shapeli.

Allowing for regional dialects, the language throughout Shapeli and the southern kingdoms was the same. Jarvo's accent was suspect. Erill coached his pronunciation until he could pass for a native of one of the border towns, whose accent had taken on a mongrel aspect after the years of social upheaval in Shapeli.

Jarvo had been clean-shaven; Insiemo had a full but scabby beard. Jarvo was blond and carefully groomed; Insiemo had a dark beard and shaggy hair streaked with grey. Jarvo wore an eye patch; Insiemo's left eye glared blindly at the world. Let them stare at the ruined eye, Erill told him and they will little note your other features. Greasepaints and stains darkened Jarvo's complexion from fair to swarthy. Strips of gum extended the scar across his nose and onto the unburned side of his face; waxy make-up made it appear he sought to hide the scarring as best he could. That camouflaged the wax extension that made a straight-bridged nose a hooked beak.

Erill considered such refinements as gum pads within the cheeks to distort the facial lines, or silver arches within the nostrils to flare out and tilt the nose upward, or clips

and gum inserts to alter the shape of the ears. She decided against all these. They took too long to adjust and required constant attention, while close or prolonged scrutiny might discern them. Best to keep with a relatively simple appearance that Jarvo could maintain for weeks. It was a good disguise, made all the more effective because there were few left alive who knew Jarvo by sight. Jarvo was dead, and Shapeli was crowded with maimed veterans such as Insiemo.

He needed a cover. Erill and Boree had maintained their carnival contacts throughout all the upheaval. It kept them eating, and beat the Sataki labor teams. Now, as the war moved away from Ingoldi, the Theater Guild began to flourish. There were patriotic pageants to stir the morale of the masses, morality plays to remind them of their duties to Sataki, and of the new age that would come when the Dark Crusade was victorious. Erill was an accomplished mime, and had no difficulty picking up her former career. Jarvo was strong, could use his hands after a fashion; there was enough work to justify his presence at the guild while he waited for his chance.

The weeks were a torture for him, skulking in the background—thinking always of Esketra, but unable to do anything. He consoled himself by gathering detailed information on the Prophet's fortress and on the workings of the Dark Crusade. It occurred to him that his information would be invaluable to an invading army, but for Jarvo it was only a potential means toward entering Ceddi and rescuing Esketra.

His task was far more complicated than he had ever imagined. Ingoldi lived under a pall of suspicion and fear. The Defenders of Sataki watched everything, and what they missed a faithful citizen might whisper to them. There were rewards for denouncing noochees. And Ceddi was absolutely closed to unauthorized persons. No one went in, no one came out, except under tightest security. No one outside of the priests of Sataki even knew for certain what went on inside the Prophet's citadel. Presumably the doomed prisoners who were dragged into

Ceddi's secret recesses found out, but none ever came out again.

After months of frustration, Jarvo had not even seen Esketra, only knew from gossip that the Prophet's favorite concubine still lived. He clung to sanity by mentally enacting a thousand mad schemes—dreaming of hidden passages, scaled walls, secret notes, hidden spies, and other vain hopes. Lately he had thought of risking everything and trying to join the priesthood. No one knew for certain how the priests of Sataki recruited new brothers.

When the new pageant was being organized, and someone suggested that Insiemo was a natural to portray villainous Scarface Jarvo, Jarvo accepted with only weak protests. It was a piece of audacity that appealed to his growing recklessness. It was a secret jest, no more than thumbing his nose at an enemy's back. But Jarvo knew he must soon find some release from tension, or he would run amok.

So the months had dragged on for him. Defeated and disgraced, nursed back to strength from the brink of death, now living in the very shadow of his enemy's citadel, dependent upon a barely grown girl—a carnival mime of strange moods and uncertain temper. And while he skulked about helplessly, Kane was laying waste to the southern kingdoms, Orted Ak-Ceddi was piling his storerooms with blood-bartered loot, and Esketra was slave to the Prophet's foul lusts.

And Erill flew at him because he was so bold as to venture forth without his nursemaid.

So Jarvo scowled and sulked, aroused from his grim brooding only when Erill finally returned to the wagon.

Her face was worried.

"What is it?" he asked sharply.

"Trouble, I'm afraid. I just got word from the guild directors."

"Trouble from the censors?" That could be very bad.

"Wish that was all it was. No, the new pageant has met with the highest official praise. It's a stirring portrayal of the victorious advance of the Dark Crusade. All the faithful should see it twice."

"Then what's the sting?"

"We're too good The Prophet has called for a command performance, to be given within the great hall of Ceddi."

Jarvo leapt to his feet with an exultant laugh. "That's too good to be true! Finally! It's the chance I've needed all along to get into Ceddi! I'll at least be able to see Esketra, maybe get word to her, maybe even . . . "

"It's to be a victory banquet—in honor of Kane's return."

XIX

Goddess

Boree's practiced fingers reshuffled the black lacquered squares, pushed the deck across the table to Erill.

"Try it again, honey."

Erill scowled, shook her blonde curls in vexation. "Twice is enough, damn it. I've got things to do. Why don't you leave me alone?"

Boree's face was expressionless, but her eyes were shadowed. "Once more."

"Go to hell. You won't even tell me what you read the last two times." Erill held the spill to her cold pipe, puffed it alight.

"Hard to read the cards tonight, honey."

"Then it's bad, and you don't want to scare me. Well, reading the cards again won't change my fate."

"I may have made a mistake somehow."

"Then it's not worth wasting my time."

"Please. Once more."

Erill swore and accepted the black deck. It angered her that her hands trembled.

Jarvo looked at his hands and cursed. The tremor didn't go away. *Nerves*, he told himself, and set his jaw determinedly.

That betrayed him. A spasm shook his muscles; his teeth chattered for an instant. Not nerves, fever.

Vaul! Not tonight . . .

Savagely Jarvo wiped at the sweat that oozed from his pallid face. He wondered again how it was possible to sweat when his guts were an icy ache. No matter. The familiar fever and chills gripped him once again—treacherously, when he was certain his strength had fully returned, certain the nights of shivering beneath sweat-soaked blankets were past and gone. No matter; it was back.

Erill must not know. She had given up trying to dissuade him from appearing at the Prophet's command performance—but only because she knew no arguments could stop him. If she found out he was suffering another relapse, she'd rail at him to stay away—his illness would allow another to take his part without suspicion, and surely in his state . . .

Jarvo grimaced. He could hear her angry voice now. Erill could be very persuasive. No wonder that husky Boree always gave way to the girl's stinging temper.

He glanced toward the westering sun. It lacked some hours yet before the troupe would assemble for their admission into Ceddi. Perhaps by then his bout would have left him. The episodes were milder, and the intervals farther apart now.

No matter. He was going into Ceddi tonight. He would see Esketra tonight, if he never saw another sunrise.

Cautiously Jarvo slipped into the wagon, opened the chest beside his bed. The familiar phial waited conveniently on top. Forcing his hands to steadiness, Jarvo poured out a measure of powdered cinchona bark, washed the bitter drug down with a swallow of water.

Orted Ak-Ceddi inhaled a tiny portion of pulverized coca leaves from the back of his thumb. Snorted, sneezed, swallowed. He gulped a mouthful of brandy to remove the

bitterness that penetrated before numbness settled over his nose and throat.

The tingling rush of cocaine glowed through his cramped limbs, obliterating the dullness of sleep as a flame touches spiderweb. He rubbed his face, refreshed as the last vestiges of hangover melted away. Beside him on the bed, Esketra made plaintive noises without awakening. Orted looked down at her naked body, dispassionately, as a sated reveller stirs and contemplates the remains of a feast, dully wonders how the banquet was passed.

Pulling on a silken robe, the Prophet padded across to a high window, drew aside the heavy curtains. Daylight flooded the chamber, but no shadow fell back from the man who stood framed in the aperture.

It was well past noon, not surprisingly—it had been dawn when Orted had called to Esketra and left the banquet hall. Kane had wished him a good night; it annoyed Orted that his hulking general seemed unaffected by the hours of carousal.

The memory of Kane drew Orted's eyes to the veil of smoke beyond Ingoldi's walls. The smoke of a thousand fires. The Sword of Sataki had returned to Ingoldi, driving before it a numberless army of neophytes from the conquered cities of the southern kingdoms. Orted thought upon the treasure-laden train of wagons that had rolled endlessly through the gates of Ceddi. Were it not for the expenses of waging war, his fortress would surely lie buried beneath an avalanche of gold by now—even as the walls of Ingoldi swelled to bursting from the ever-growing press of new worshippers.

Tonight another great banquet in honor of the endless victories of the Dark Crusade. In honor of Kane.

Orted frowned at the smoky pall of Kane's camp. What was the hidden motive of Kane's return? The Prophet's spies reported that certain elements within Shapeli already whispered that Kane might rule an empire as well as lead an army . . .

Orted dug another pinch of powdered coca leaves from his golden snuffbox. Kane had served him well—thus

far. But each knew they played a deadly game, and neither intended to lose. Orted snuffed, rubbed his nose, and smiled thinly. A game, but the rules were his own, and Kane might have cause to regret his triumphal march into Ceddi.

Replacing the snuffbox, Orted reached for his goblet.

Kane drained the chalice and set it negligently aside. The die he had just cast showed two. Reaching across the table, he moved one of the featureless jade cubes one space across the hexagonally patterned gameboard.

Across the table from him, Colonel Alain, his second-in command, grunted in his yellow beard and cast the die in turn. Five. He studied the board in silence, finally moved one of the jade cubes one space across, to confront the piece Kane had just moved.

He pursed his lips. "Challenge."

"Accepted." Kane turned the jade cube over, revealing a three. Alain did likewise with his piece: a four. Kane removed Alain's piece, reversed his own and edged it into the vacated space. Alain ruefully scratched his beard; of his twenty-one pieces, Kane now had captured nine, against losing two.

"Go on with your report," prompted Kane, reaching for the die.

Dolnes tore his attention away from the gameboard, shrugged his squat shoulders. "That's all of it."

Kane cast a three, hesitated an instant, then withdrew an advanced piece one space. He turned again to his spy.

"Is it? You're certain she's the one?"

"As certain as I can be," Dolnes assured him. "You got to remember it's damn near impossible getting any kind of information. Things have just been too torn apart and kicked around here. No records of anything, generally too few survivors left to talk. You got to find people who might know, who might remember, and who might even talk about it. And asking questions is about as safe work as doing stand-in for a sabre drill dummy."

"I know the difficulties," Kane said coldly. "If it were

simple, I'd not be paying you so generously." He added: "Paying for results."

"Well, she's the one you want—near as I can tell without asking her."

"That isn't necessary," said Kane, moving another piece. "Challenge."

"Denied," Alain grudgingly decided. He withdrew his piece to the rear, and Kane occupied the contested space.

"What does the die determine?" Dolnes asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

"From which face of the hexagon a piece can be moved," Kane told him. "You *can* find the girl, I assume."

"Of course." Dolnes studied the strange board. "How are the pieces ranked?"

"One is of the highest order, descending to six. There are as many of each rank as each piece's numerical value."

"I'm not familiar with this game," Dolnes commented, intrigued.

"It's quite old," Kane told him drily. "I want this girl brought to me. Tonight. Without fail. Colonel Alain will assign you men for the task."

Dolnes nodded. "The pieces all look alike. How can you tell the value of each piece as you move them about?"

"Through memory," Kane advised. "Coupled with a lot of deduction and guesswork. And you can alway challenge."

"What if you guess wrong?"

"What do you think?" said Kane.

XX

Her Lips Are Painted Red . . .

The command performance of *The Invincible March of the Sword of Sataki* was a huge success. That the audience was drunkenly exuberant may have helped. Certainly the aloof, black-clad priests would never have given vent to such raucous applause.

Within the Prophet's citadel, one end of the great hall had been cleared, and a stage set up. As the evening wore on, wagonloads of sets and costumes rolled into Ceddi, accompanied by actors, chorus, and as many others of the guild who could find excuse to share in the Prophet's lavish entertainment. By the time the main courses were picked bones, the audience was in a boisterous spirit, and the performers were anxious to begin.

The pageant itself was a long, loud, tumultuous affair—basically a series of tableaus and processions, interspersed with dramatic speeches and noisy sham battles. A narrator supplied continuity and interpreted the action, while the chorus shouted chants and battle songs, musicians battered their instruments, and the stage crew dashed about with sets and sound effects. The overall

effect was somewhere in between a morality play, a travesty, and a free-for-all. The audience responded with enthusiastic shouts and catcalls.

The performers were elaborately costumed and masked, clad in lightweight stage armor and brandishing wooden weapons. Cavalrymen galloped about with wickerwork horses suspended from their shoulders. With as many as forty or fifty performers onstage in a given battle—all shouting and laying about and rushing back and forth—the uproar was deafening. Most parts were indistinguishable, so that the slain rank and file rose again between scenes, to do battle and be slain again. Key figures in the drama often had speaking roles—usually soliloquies and dramatic speeches—delivered center-stage with extravagant gestures and posturing.

The character portraying Orted Ak-Ceddi had the lead role—a tall figure in black silks who made numerous stirring declamations, and who always charged fearlessly about in the fore of each battle. However, most of the audience preferred the Kane—a beefy actor in oversized armor, who forever rushed about shouting commands and imprecations, crushing all who stood before him. Minor roles went to important officers, brave and courageous men all, and to the leaders of the enemy forces, rotten and cowardly to a man.

The role of Jarvo, portrayed by one Insiemo, was typical of the latter—part buffoon, part dastard. While Jarvo's armor would turn up again on half a dozen other players as the pageant wore on, the Sandotneri archvillain was easily recognizable by his scarred face, gruesomely exaggerated with stage make-up. In addition Insiemo wore an absurd blond wig, heel pads within his sollerets to increase his height, and spoke in a high, lisping voice. It was an excellent impersonation, a favorite of the audiences, and his efforts were applauded with loud boos and yells.

Jarvo made a short, cackling speech about how he would blaspheme Sataki and crush the Dark Crusade. Laughing fiendishly, he cavorted about the stage butch-

ering unarmed peasants and mothers who crouched over shrieking children.

A pause to shift sets and for the dead to scramble back to the wings, during which the narrator droned on, and the chorus chanted dirges and calls to battle. Kane and Orted appeared at center stage, made long and improbable speeches, embraced in friendship. Kane raised his sword. Newly resurrected actors in mail and armor rushed to join him, stage horses swaying about their hips. Kane marched them all about the stage, their ranks swelling, everyone loudly singing "The Sword of Sataki Is Drawn." The audience cheered and joined in.

Again a shift of sets. From the opposite wing, Jarvo and his band of killers strutted onto stage. At the sight of the Sword of Sataki, boldly riding forth from the other wing, the Sandotneri cavalry halted in disorder. Jarvo squealed and rushed about in fright, shouting for his men to protect him. Useless. The Sword of Sataki swept across the stage, knocking over the panic-stricken Sandotneri troopers with joyful mayhem. Jarvo capered all about, seeking escape—only to blunder up against Kane's charge. Shrieking for mercy, for Sataki to forgive him, Jarvo died wretchedly beneath Kane's wooden ax and a tumult of shouts and jeers.

The pageant had an hour yet to drag on, but Jarvo's part was finished. Grimly he stripped off his costume and armor, while Kane and the victorious Sword of Sataki marched about the stage and sang "The Sword of Sataki Strikes True." Technically Jarvo should remain with the troupe to assist with sets and costumes, serve as an extra in forthcoming battles—but everyone connected with the guild who could con a pass was here for the performance, and he would not be missed.

As part of the gala, the celebrators wore fanciful masks —covering only the upper half of their faces, so as not to interfere with dining and drink. Jarvo peeled off his wig and stage make-up, appropriated an elegant, not-too-threadbare doublet from the costume store, and carefully adjusted the mask he had brought with him. It was a waxen caricature of his own face.

So accoutred, he slipped away from the backstage confusion, moving into the shadows of the great hall to mingle with the servants and guests. After the pageant, there would be acrobats and dancers, more drinking and general carousal. The performers could join in, so long as they held in the background. No one would remark upon him, and in the milling throng he could find a way to reach Esketra.

Beyond that, Jarvo had no firm plans. His first great gamble was won, however—neither Kane nor any of the others had seen anything amiss in the Jarvo who pranced about the stage. Why should they suspect, after all? Jarvo was dead. Yet, with Kane . . .

No matter. Luck was with him tonight. The fever had subsided to only a heady surge of his blood. He had penetrated undetected into the stronghold of his enemies. When he reached Esketra, they would find a way. In the drunkenness and revelry, and the confusion of packing up after the performance, anything was possible.

Accepting a goblet of wine from a servant, Jarvo confidently swaggered through the shadows surrounding the banquet tables. There were several hundreds of seated guests—officers of the Sword of Sataki, along with officers of the Defenders of Sataki and of the growing regiments of the Prophet's infantry. Others of the Prophet's flatterers and advisors joined in the banquet, along with other important personages. Also seated, but not joining in the hilarity, were numerous of the black-robed priests of Sataki. Whatever their thoughts of the raucous dissipation that reigned in their ancient sanctuary, their faces remained hidden within the shadow of their cowls. Beyond the tables were gathered a jostling fringe of servants and retainers, personages of lesser rank, stray entertainers, guards, and, doubtless, spies.

Jarvo took a position beside a column from which he could view the high table. Kane was there, his massive presence unmistakable despite the lion mask. He sat at the right of Orted Ak-Ceddi, the latter wearing a mask of featureless black. Apart from the increasing gaiety,

they appeared to be arguing tersely. For all Jarvo's anxiety, they were completely ignoring the pageant.

To the Prophet's left—Jarvo's blood roared through his temples. The kite's mask could not conceal the proud features of Esketra.

Kane's temper was smouldering beneath the double mask of lion fur and of politesse. He wanted better than supercilious evasions to his questions, and the Prophet was not to oblige him.

"But it's foolhardy to continue our advance," Kane growled.

"Why not?" Orted demanded. "We're winning every battle. Keep after them until the last city has fallen."

"Yes, and we take casualties with every victory, too. I need more men, more horses, more . . ."

"I've sent you reinforcements by the thousands."

"I need still more. The farther our front moves from Shapeli, the more men I have to detach to guard our rear and to keep supply lines open. Damn it, I've cut a near thousand-mile swath through the southern kingdoms as things now stand."

"And you can go a thousand miles farther," Orted cut him off.

"Do you have any conception what that kind of distance means in terms of an army on horseback? This isn't a jog across the parade ground. It means long weeks, months in the saddle—foraging for food and water as supply lines grow uncertain, cutting across mile after mile of hostile country."

"This is the Dark Crusade, Kane—not a raiding party. If you can't solve simple military problems, I'll find someone who can."

"The solution is evident," Kane snarled. "I need more cavalry, and I need time to consolidate the territories we've won."

"I'll see that you get what you need," Orted promised curtly.

Kane swore and looked to his flagon. He had intended

to talk this out in private, but the Prophet had avoided him during these few days.

"Certain of your strategy is incomprehensible," Kane pressed him. "Already Ingoldi is crowded beyond all reasoning. And yet you insist that I send ever more new converts from the fallen kingdoms. As it is, you've more people here than can live within the walls."

"Then I'll raise new walls," Orted said.

"So you'll have the largest city ever built," Kane said. "For what purpose? These people have to eat, they have to have places to live, they . . ."

"They are the Children of Sataki. It is enough that they dwell before the temple of their god."

Kane studied the Prophet carefully. There had to be some insidious logic underlying the man's fanaticism—some motivation for self-gain behind his rhetoric and platitudes.

"It would be better—after these neophytes have been thoroughly indoctrinated, of course—to send them back to their cities. Granted that it is impossible to hold vast expanses of conquered territory, it would be wise to have loyal Satakis occupying the cities at my army's back. I've conquered kingdom after kingdom, one after another—but if the unconquered kingdoms to the west ever unite their armies, cut between us and our line of supply . . ."

"Then you'll just have to see that that never happens," Orted warned him. "My commands are unchanged. I can't expect you to understand them; I insist that you obey them. Otherwise . . ."

And neither did he find it necessary to complete his sentence.

The pageant thundered to a close amidst loud ovation. The performers took their bows, then broke to partake of the leavings of the banquet, while a new troupe of musicians and dancing girls took over the entertainment. Kane and Orted Ak-Ceddi maintained a sullen truce while silks and bare limbs whirled frenziedly, and servants dashed from wine cup to empty wine cup.

Eventually the dancers had to rest. In the lull, Orted

stood up to deliver an impassioned and interminable oration expressing Sataki's gratitude for the brilliant leadership of Kane, the unyielding courage of the Sword of Sataki, the wholehearted loyalty of the Children of Sataki, the ceaseless devotion of the priests of Sataki—and that he, the Prophet of Sataki, was also grateful and proud of the common effort—and that while great things had been accomplished, further effort and further sacrifice were yet called for to push the Dark Crusade to final victory. Cheers and applause and a few impromptu demonstrations frequently interrupted his address. Afterward, Kane rose to offer similar comments—expressing his own humble pride and sense of personal fulfillment in being able to serve Sataki in his own small way, as well as the feeling of purpose and glory each soldier shared as they fought courageously to advance the Dark Crusade in the face of the forces of oppression and tyranny who would crush the one true faith and its freedom-loving faithful—if they but could. More applause. Kane at length sat down, very thirsty.

Musicians and dancers returned. The revellers settled down to earnest drinking and merriment.

Through it all, Jarvo watched impatiently from the shadow. The thought galled him that a suicidal attack might even now slay Kane and the Prophet. It would save countless innocent lives—if he succeeded. It would not win him Esketra.

Let it be Esketra.

The white-and-black-speckle feathers of the kite's mask covered her face like ermine—the sharp, hooked bill curving down over her patrician nose. Behind the tufts of feathers, her grey eyes stirred listlessly about the hall—drifting everywhere, seeing nothing. Her black hair was an ebon vignette about her pale perfect features. Cold, aloof, desirable as the kiss of a final dawn. She toyed with a platter of sweetmeats and small birds, cracking their bones in her sharp tiny teeth.

Minutes dragged by. Realizing he must not draw attention to himself, Jarvo drank sparingly and exchanged pleasantries with others of the revellers. The banquet

began to assume that frantic state of drunkenness that presages a long night of debauchery. Guests were leaving their places at the tables, wandering over to converse with friends. Small knots of men and women gathered in cliques, moved about the great hall. Servants hustled to clear away empty tables to make room.

Another chamber off from the great hall was opened as a ballroom, and the boisterous crowd quickly overflowed into the new space. Musicians plied stringed instruments, tambourines and flutes, and a number of couples began to form a dance. As guests streamed into the ballroom, others remained in the great hall to pick over the remnants of the feast and stay closer to the wine. A group of cavalry officers commandeered several of the musicians, began to sing loudly "Joyously They March to Their Deaths," beating time with their cups.

Kane remained in the great hall, drinking and singing with his officers. Orted vanished in the general confusion —Jarvo thought he was led away by a laughing blonde who wore a woodsprite's mask. Esketra let herself be taken into the ballroom on the arm of an officer in a devil's mask, and Jarvo followed as close as he dared.

Esketra and her escort joined the dancers, and Jarvo was forced to wait along the fringes of the ballroom, to maintain a guise of drunken conviviality with other garishly masked guests. It was sheer torture to be this close to Esketra, stand helplessly while she was whirled about the floor on the arms of her captors. He wondered how many of the other women in the room were prisoners from the Prophet's seraglio, how many the willing consorts of this gang of cold-blooded plunderers and murderers.

She was wearing a long, full skirt of gauzy grey and silver stuff, her midriff bare, with a tight fitting jacket of similar material cut just below her breasts. Her bare limbs flashed as the dance swirled her skirts, and Jarvo's skull pounded with rage each time a new partner embraced her. After tonight—fortune willing—Esketra would be free. Later he, Jarvo, would have an accounting with her captors.

It seemed possible that he might join in the dance, work his way to her. Jarvo was reluctant to try it. Her astonishment on recognition might betray them. Best to approach her alone.

He waited, and his patience at length was rewarded.

The night had grown late. More and more of the guests were departing with the approach of dawn. In the great hall, the singers were hoarse and exhausted. Not a few revellers snored in corners or half across tables. In the ballroom the dancers grew weary, slipped away couple by couple for more private pursuits. The servants left their masters to their drunken stupor, and most of the performers had long since dispersed.

Esketra, declining the arm of her last partner, turned her scowling kite's mask about the ballroom. She seemed vexed over some matter, from the brusqueness with which she rebuffed the remaining revellers. On none too steady legs, she strolled from the dance floor and made her way through the dwindling crowd of merrymakers. As she passed from the ballroom into the hallway beyond, Jarvo started after her.

He followed her past the scattered couples and comatose drunks who spilled out into the adjacent hallways of the fortress. Esketra seemed to have a definite destination in mind, as her steps took her farther into the recesses of Ceddi.

Jarvo waited until there were no other guests in view, then called softly: "Esketra!"

She was starting for a stairway that led to the upper levels. At his call, she turned sharply. Her lips were deep red, her skin pale, but her expression was hidden behind the kite's mask. Her voice was cold with suppressed anger.

"What is it?"

"Esketra!" he repeated stupidly, rushing to her side.

Her eyes were cold behind the mask. "What do you wish with me?"

"Esketra! Don't you know me!"

"You are masked, my drunken buffoon. And may I add that I consider your mask in disgustingly poor taste."

"Masked?"

"Yes, fool. Remove it if you wish to speak to me—or else hurry back to your wine barrel."

Jarvo hesitated, wondering what words to speak.

With impatient fingers, Esketra yanked away the waxen mask that mimicked Jarvo's own face.

"Esketra!" he breathed, stepping toward her.

She recoiled. "Drunken swine! Do you wear two such fool's masks!"

"I wear no mask for you, Esketra."

"Oh." She pressed a trembling hand to her lips. "Oh, *no!*"

"I've come to take you away, Esketra."

"You're dead, Jarvo."

He laughed, understanding her shocked revulsion. "Kane made his worst error there, beloved. I survived the battle, hid myself in the fens. Two friends found me, nursed me to strength, brought me with them to Ingoldi. I've been living with them in the Theatre Guild for many weeks, laying plans to get you away from here."

She stared at him fixedly. Her flesh did not respond when he held her close. Jarvo felt a shudder pass through her, understood what a shock it was for her to see him here in the heart of her captors' stronghold.

"To get me away from here?" she said in a hushed voice.

"Yes!" Jarvo looked around, mastering his own rush of emotion. No one was yet in sight. "And tonight is perfect. With half the fortress dead drunk and the rest asleep, we can bundle you in a cloak, slip past whatever guard remains. Hundreds of guests have been staggering home all night. A quick change of garments and mask, and we'll look like all the others."

She stared for a moment more, then slowly nodded. "Yes, of course. You're here to rescue me."

"In another hour you'll be free again!" Jarvo exulted. Let the problems of getting out of Shapeli await another day. He knew in a rush of confidence that his ploy would get them safely out of Ceddi.

"Of course," Esketra murmured, suddenly throwing off her frozen state. "I'll need other garments, as you say,

and a different mask. Wait here, my chambers are close by. I'll get what I need."

"I'm coming with you."

She pushed him back. "Too dangerous! They'd suspect if they saw you with me. Stay here. I'll just get what I need and hurry back to you."

"But if . . ."

"Do as I say! Wait here for me! Do you want to throw away this one chance?"

"No. I'll wait, of course. But hurry!"

"I won't be but a moment," she promised, blowing him a kiss as she fled up the stairway. "Just wait here for me."

Jarvo waited until her footsteps receded—then the agony of suspense destroyed his momentary bliss, dragging each second into an hour. He paced the hall, alert for guards or other guests. They were far within Ceddi, presumably near the Prophet's living quarters. No one else would dare come this far—but that made his own presence here suspect. He cursed silently, looked about for concealment.

What can be keeping her? Impossible to know how long since she left. How long had it been? How long would it take?

A thought shook him—a vision of Esketra darting into her chambers, and finding the drunken Orted Ak-Ceddi. Jarvo envisioned the leering Prophet crushing the struggling girl to his sweaty chest, forcing his will upon her—while he paced about here like a fool!

The thought was beyond enduring. Stealthily Jarvo climbed the stairway up which Esketra had gone. He would follow her—be ready to rush in, if any man sought to hold her back.

The stairway opened onto a level above, and hallways stretched darkly in all directions. Doorways led off from the hallways at random intervals—evidently the living quarters for Ceddi's masters were in this area, as Jarvo suspected.

He paused uncertainly, cursed himself. He had no way of knowing which way Esketra had gone. If he sought to

follow blindly, he might get lost, miss her as she returned for him. He started back. No, he had come this far for good reason; he would risk following along the hallway for a distance. He would not go farther from the stairway than he could retrace his steps.

He had gone only a short distance, when his straining ears caught the familiar clink of weapons and mail. Guardsmen were coming down the hallway.

Jarvo glared wildly. No time to run, and his presence here would not bear interrogation. A doorway close at hand. Unlocked. Jarvo pushed it open, stepped into the darkness within—just as a party of guardsmen rounded a bend in the hall.

Leaving the doorway cracked, he waited to see if they would pass without alarm. Voices drifted through to him.

"Keep silent. We'll take him before he can run."

That was Orted Ak-Ceddi. But how . . .

"Oh, the poor fool won't go anywhere. I made him promise not to follow."

"It seems impossible that Jarvo could have been lurking here all this time!" Orted muttered.

"He said he had help from the Theatre Guild," Esketra said, laughing softly. "What's impossible is that the scarface lout believes he's rescuing me. The mistress of the wealthiest and most powerful ruler in the world—and the silly fool thought he'd save me from my fate!"

"If we take him alive, you can explain to him the jest," Orted chuckled. "Softly now!"

XXI

. . . It Looks Like She's Been Fed

A dozen guardsmen crept past him—hastily summoned after Esketra burst in upon Orted and his blonde companion from the banquet. The Prophet, who was expecting a jealous outburst from his leman, did not let surprise slow his reactions to her breathless revelation.

The world crashed into fragments over Jarvo, pinning him in its ruins. For a timeless interval he stood paralyzed, heart silent, breath stilled, mind stunned. Had any man found him thus, they might have carved him like a roasted goose, and evoked no more response. As it was, his frozen shock saved his life—had his paralysis been less, Jarvo would have flung himself from concealment and lunged for Esketra's pale throat, though a dozen blades hacked him down.

They passed him without suspecting his presence. A soul cannot scream its agony, so that there was only a soft rustle as Jarvo slumped down against the wall, buried his face in his hands, the pain too intense to endure.

All his hopes and ambitions, all the fool's illusions that

had lifted him from the ashes of his blasted existence, all were dead mockeries. The knowledge whose awareness he had so long ignored and rationalized to suit his idiot gropings could no longer be denied—ripped through his shattered defenses. For a black moment his mind reeled on the brink of catatonic madness.

Then came rage.

Let die the heart.

Let die the soul; let die the brain.

No life. No love. Hate is all.

Jarvo never remembered in what manner he fled Ceddi.

A blind man wanders unscathed through a burning city.

A drunken fool laughs in a ditch while thousands battle to the death.

Guards pay no heed to a ghost.

Jarvo wandered away from Ceddi, unheeding as the hue and cry echoed behind him.

He stumbled past drunken guards, besotted revellers, too sunken in debauchery to grasp the significance of the strident tocsin of alarm. A germ of animal cunning guided his reeling course away from those who might halt his flight.

A tragic buffoon. His face a mask too grotesque to be real. Too mindlessly drunk to evoke more than a sneer.

Grovel, little clown. Life spits in your tears.

He lurched through empty hallways, past the snoring revellers and the groping dancers, past the fumbling guards and the blindly rushing priests. The alarm was shouted throughout the spidery corridors, but in the milling chaos no one paid note to the pallid-fleshed dead man who staggered through their midst—glaring with an unseeing eye through his grotesque demon's mask.

There was a gate before him, open into the night. Jarvo blundered through, and into the cool darkness—never wondering that the guards who should have barred his way lay in puddles of scarlet, and stared back through glazed eyes. The dead do not challenge the dead.

Jarvo wandered through the darkness, paying no heed

and paid no heed. About him in the night, the gods of war danced and howled. Horsemen tore past him. Armed men fled through the streets. Houses hid behind barred doors and shuttered windows. The cries and shouts that usurped the stillness before dawn did not reach his throbbing brain. He neither knew nor cared that death held its crimson revels in Ingoldi this night.

His soul was dead, but rage stirred from the ashes. No instinct of self-preservation guided his blind steps, for the will to live was dead. Rage animated his fever-seared flesh, and the flame of vengeance rose from the cinders of his soul.

He reeled through the fear-drenched streets of Ingoldi, unseen and unseeing in the bleak hour before dawn. Fever clawed at him, lost before the agony of his spirit. Slowly the dullness of his shock left him. The pain grew worse, but his fury left him oblivious to all other sensations. He was like a man who has received his death-wound, feels nothing in his berserk lust to slay his slayer, though his hands are slippery with his own lifeblood and his feet trip upon his dangling entrails.

He was walking along the shadow of the walls of Ceddi, and before him loomed a deeper mass of shadow. It was the Tower of Yslsl.

The door was ajar. He went inside. Within was darkness and silence.

Stairs spiralled upward into the night. Without volition, he climbed into the night. He came to the top of the stairs.

Fever and madness stabbed through his faltering consciousness. Jarvo stood upon the ledge at the tower's summit, staring blindly at the crawling sunburst of jet that glowered from the blank wall.

He had a fleeting instant of coherent thought. *What had drawn him here?* This was no place of refuge.

The writhing sunburst held his chaotic consciousness. In a flash of madness Jarvo saw that it was a doorway, that beyond it something waited, something called to him to open the doorway. Something beyond sensed the in-

tolerable agony of his soul. Something hungered for that agony . . .

Jarvo stumbled away from the chill stone. The brink was at his heels. He flung himself forward, as his feet shot out from under him, his legs skidded on the edge of the stone.

For an instant his hands clawed at the smooth stone of the ledge, his legs kicked over emptiness. Then his outflung arms threw his balance forward. Clawing and kicking, he scrambled onto the ledge.

For a long while he lay there, too numb from fever and shock to crawl to his feet. His narrow brush with falling to his death cut through the trance that shackled his brain. Fear of falling—the instinctive fear that an infant knows before it draws its first wailing breath—jarred him back to awareness, hauled him forth from the abyss of madness.

The light of dawn was greying the circle above him, when Jarvo finally roused himself from his stupor. He came to his feet as one who awakes from an opium dream—thinking back over the scenes he has witnessed, wondering at the blank intervals in his memory, uncertain where dream and reality impinged. He rubbed his face wearily, tried to take stock.

He was in the Tower of Yslsl. Small wonder no one had come upon him while he lay here. He remembered briefly the strange illusion he had had of the black sunburst of stone. Nightmare born of fever and pain.

The rest of the evening was not nightmare. Grimly, as a man palpates a broken limb to assess whether he can force it to bear weight, Jarvo recalled the events of the night. The memory of Esketra's betrayal was like the pain of a bone as it is set. The pain was unavoidable. Once confronted, his thoughts could move on.

Jarvo swore. They would be combing the city for him now. His disastrous blunder had made Ingoldi a death-trap for him. Escape was imperative—or else certain capture and death.

With the realization of his danger, a new rush of dread made him cry out. He had told Esketra where he was

hiding, who had helped him. Orted's vengeance would not be limited to one fool with a scarred face . . .

Recklessly Jarvo clambered down the spiral stairway. His life was worthless—but he must not allow Erill to share his doom.

Was there time? How long had he lain here? The Prophet would strike swiftly.

He flung back the heavy door and burst into the dawn-lit streets. He had run only a short distance before he encountered the first sprawled corpse.

Dumbly Jarvo gaped at the dead—recognizing guardsmen of the Prophet's army, Defenders of Sataki, and now and again a fallen cavalryman. Parts of the city were aflame, and the trail of death led toward the main gates.

Jarvo was in no state to fathom such mysteries—but it was evident after a glance that the tension between Kane and Orted Ak-Ceddi had passed the breaking point.

Jarvo paused only long enough to strip a dead Defender of his crimson surcoat and hauberk, wind a strip of bloody cloth about the scarred half of his face, clap on steel helmet and buckle on sword. Only a few cautious citizens were stirring from behind bolted doors, and no one challenged the red-bandaged Defender who ran through the corpse-strewn streets.

The Theatre Guild was not distant, and it was obvious to him that smoke was drifting from that quarter. He could see the overturned wagons and ruined stalls as he skidded around the last corner. A milling crowd of townsfolk was gathered about the smoking carnage. Jarvo felt his belly tense with chill.

A pack of children were scrambling about the wreckage. They paid him no attention, as the adults sidled quickly away.

"What happened here!" he demanded.

"Don't you know?" a small girl wondered. "They raided a noochee hideout here during the night. Then General Kane rode out of the city, and nobody could stop him. But you know that."

"Did any noochees escape?" Jarvo blurted—then stared at the girl.

"Of course not," she said, trying to adjust the fillet of jade beads.

XXII

Let It Bleed

While it was days before Kane fitted all the pieces together of that night, it was Jarvo's unforeseen presence in Ceddi that threw all his plans into chaos.

The uneasy alliance between Kane and Orted Ak-Ceddi could end only in the death of one or the other. Both understood the situation; each had his own view as to whose death it must be.

The potentially explosive balance had existed this long for only two reasons.

Orted was loath to eliminate Kane so long as he depended on the continued victories of the Sword of Sataki. Kane's officers and the majority of his professional cavalry were loyal to Kane. Until the Prophet could supplant Kane's mercenaries with enough of the faithful followers of Sataki, to move against Kane was to risk disastrous mutiny.

Kane, on the other hand, was reluctant to move against Orted openly until he understood the nature of the Prophet's demonstrated sorcerous powers. Initially Kane had misjudged the former bandit, had assumed the man

was either a greedy opportunist or a rash zealot. Either way, Kane's design had been to dupe the Prophet into financing an army under Kane's command, and, at the first convenient moment, to send the Prophet to the professed rewards of his afterworld. But there appeared an unknown factor. Orted Ak-Ceddi was not, entirely, a fraud. Kane needed to know more—but the Prophet's growing interference was forcing his hand.

Kane struck first to break the deadlock.

He had conquered half the southern kingdoms with the Sword of Sataki. Already an empire beyond the dreams of the most avaricious conqueror lay under Kane's heel. Eventually, Kane knew, the whole of the southern kingdoms would fall to him. Coupled with Shapeli, more than a third of the gigantic Great Northern Continent would be under Kane's rule. From there, in time, the old provinces and kingdoms of the Serranthonian Empire. Then the remainder of the supercontinent.

But for the present, Kane's army was overextended. Kane required more men and weapons, and he needed time enough to consolidate his victories. Instead, Orted demanded that he press on against the southern kingdoms, insisted that the conquered populaces be transferred to Shapeli. The latter was incomprehensible madness; the former was to invite military disaster.

Kane struck.

It was to be a straightforward *coup d'etat*. During the night of the great banquet, an artful courtesan in Kane's employ would entice Orted to leave at the height of the revels. Then, when the night was far gone and the fortress deep in debauchery, Kane's assassins would burst in upon the Prophet as he lay besotted with drink and drugs.

Orted's flesh might be proof against steel, but Kane's assassins were not so limited in imagination.

Esketra, stung with jealousy when Orted vanished from the festivities, was already on her way to his chambers when Jarvo accosted her. She burst in on the Prophet, even as Kane's assassins were dispatching the guards at a little-used entrance to the fortress. By the

time they reached his chambers, Orted was stalking Jarvo with a party of his guardsmen.

Kane, waiting with a core of trusted followers in the great hall, misconstrued the sudden alarm and appearance of armed guards. Assuming that his plot had miscarried, and that the Prophet was moving to bottle him up within Ceddi, Kane and his men bolted. Blades were drawn, challenges and accusations shouted, and in an instant the uneasy balance erupted into open battle.

In a wild melee, Kane cut his way through the bewildered guards, out of Ceddi and through the city. Fierce fighting ensued, as Orted quickly reacted to the long expected crisis, sought to trap Kane within Ingoldi, away from the main force of his army. Kane was not to be entrapped that night. By dawn a wake of Sataki dead marked his passage through Ingoldi, and his camp beyond the city wall was deserted.

Kane examined the limp body that lay on the cot. He looked over at Dolnes and grunted. "She's alive, I'll grant you. What happened?"

His henchman picked at a fresh scab on his dirty forearm. Outside Kane's tent, the sounds of men and horses echoed across the bivouac. Ingoldi lay a hard day's ride behind them, and he had been pressed to catch up with Kane's retreat.

"I'm not at all sure. When we came for her, the mob was tearing the quarter apart. Evidently the Defenders had arrived before us—someone had denounced them as a nest of noochees. There wasn't a lot left."

"So I gather," Kane commented sourly.

"It wasn't anything we could have planned for," Dolnes protested. "We were lucky enough to find her still alive. They'd left her nailed to the side of a wagon when they finished with her. The mob didn't like us pulling her down, and we had to bust a few heads riding clear. By then, all hell was busting loose at the main gate. We came after you, and it was a close thing. I don't guess the ride trying to keep up with you did her much good either."

Kane looked closely at the bruised face. "I'll be

damned," he muttered. "Girl, you should have jumped one of those nights."

"What is it?"

"Never mind. See Colonel Alain about your pay. But first call my surgeons to my tent. It may be that you'll earn your gold after all."

XXIII

Doorways

If being alive were a good thing, Erill decided she was lucky to be alive.

As from a nightmare, she recalled the assault on the guild by the Defenders of Sataki, remembered shouts and screams in the night, the rending and crashing of broken doors and overturned wagons, the helpless terror as brutal hands caught at her, the unending waves of pain . . .

Between black intervals of pain and terror, certain indelible visions burst through. Boree, swinging a gory ax, beaten down under a rush of mailed bodies. Her friends struck down without knowing the reason for their murder. An endless succession of leering, grunting, snarling faces. Pain lancing her flesh. The dull wonder as she saw the nails pressed to her pinioned flesh, watched the dreamlike, inexorable swing of the wooden mallet.

Their angry, gloating voices gobbled in her ears. Dimly Erill understood. Jarvo had found Esketra. Esketra had betrayed him. Jarvo was trapped in Ceddi, and Erill was hanging from iron nails. If she was conscious when

Kane's men pulled her down, dragged her away from the howling mob, she had no memory of it.

The morning wind from across the sea was cool on her face, and the waves of the Southern Sound washed over her bare feet. Erill glanced down at the fading scars that marred the insteps of her feet. A month ago she could not have walked for the torn flesh and broken bones. She looked at the puckered scars across both her palms, remembering how she had been unable to so much as feed herself for many days. So pain and the memory of pain must fade; given time enough, Erill supposed she could endure any ordeal.

She looked wistfully across the sea. Beyond the waves lay the Great Southern Continent, an easy voyage across the Southern Sound. The ruins of fabled Carsultyal slumbered there—mankind's first great city. Kane spoke of it often. His broadsword was forged in Carsultyal, centuries ago. Such antique blades were worth more than their weight in gold, for never since Carsultyal's fall has such steel been forged. It might be pleasant to journey to Carsultyal, perhaps lose herself in the cold wastes of the Herratlonai, the desert Kane said lay southeast of there. Nothing lived there anymore, nothing at all. The wind-etched wasteland had never heard of the Dark Crusade.

Perhaps Kane would let her go there. Why not? Erill had given up trying to guess Kane's motives.

She had awakened to find herself in his tent, her wounds salved and bandaged at Kane's direction. She had been unconscious for several days—lost in a sort of dream state born of delirium and the laudanum Kane got her to swallow.

They had ridden miles beyond Shapeli, Erill lying comatose in the baggage train. There had been hard fighting along the way, but Erill knew of that only afterward. The Sword of Sataki was broken by rebellion, as Kane gathered such of his regiments to him as remained loyal to Kane and not to a madman in Ceddi. For now, Kane held a broken sword by the hilt—as his mercenaries overpowered the factions recruited from the Prophet's

faithful. By the time Erill had recovered sufficiently to be aware of her surroundings, Kane was temporarily camped at Intantemri, one of the southern kingdoms strongholds he had taken before his break with the Satakis.

She awakened to the awareness of Kane's eyes. He was seated beside her cot, so that when she opened her eyes, the two fixed flames of blue ice were no longer part of the drugged darkness, but stared at her from his coarse-hewn face. It was not a pleasant awakening. Erill closed her eyes, waited for this nightmare to pass as well.

"You are awake now," Kane said.

She was awake. There was a compelling force to Kane's will that lifted her from oblivion, as a powerful hand hauls a drowning child from an ebon pool.

She opened her eyes, took in her surroundings without comprehension, without connecting this world to the world of pain and mob terror. That awareness would come later, as her wounds healed, as she was borne along in the wake of Kane's rebellion.

"I want you to answer my questions," Kane said.

If he asked, she must answer. Her own will was still lost in the ebon pool.

"Once you were in a city called Gillera," Kane murmured.

Erill winced. There was another pain, another scar.

"It was night," Kane persisted. "The Satakis had surrounded the city."

Erill whimpered, tried to pull her eyes away from Kane's baleful stare, found she could not.

"I want you to tell me everything that happened to you that night."

"No," she moaned.

"Tell me what happened that night."

"No!"

"Erill, you *will* tell me."

Kane's eyes held her will, and though she had not screamed when the wooden mallet drove the iron nails into her flesh, Erill cried out then. But Kane's eyes commanded, and eventually she told him all he desired of her.

Even now that night of horror chilled her more than

the memory of her crucifixion. Erill looked again at the sea. Untying her skirt and bandeau, she carefully laid the garments on the dry sand, then plunged into the warm surf.

The sea was clean. Its waves carried her effortlessly, its salty breath stung her kisses, its pulse was her heartbeat. Erill loved the sea.

Kane warned of sharks, of deadly riptides.

Erill loved the sea, and didn't care.

He was a strange man. Erill knew little about him. Even in Ingoldi, little was spoken of Kane's past—unusual for so prominent a figure. To while away the boredom of her recovery, Erill had asked others about Kane. Some said one thing, some another; no one had much to answer. Kane was a good general; they followed him. It was all a soldier need know.

Kane was a mystery. The mystery intrigued Erill during the long months of battle and intrigue, attack and retreat. She suspected he might answer her if she questioned him about his past. For that reason Erill never asked.

"Why do you keep me with you?" she once asked Kane.

"I don't. Go where you wish."

"There's no place to go."

"Then stay."

It was not inertia that kept her with Kane. Erill sensed that she rode within the eye of the storm, that all about her the wars of the Dark Crusade, the horrors of the shadow world, laid waste to everything that stood.

"Where is there refuge, Kane?" she one night asked, inspired with the fumes of hashish.

"In this world there is no refuge," Kane told her.

"And in another world?"

"I cannot say. I know only this world. Yet I think in any world it must be the same."

She blew a wreath of smoke. "Then I'll seek refuge in dream."

"Seek no refuge in dream. A dream is unattainable."

"I know that a nightmare is attainable," she said bitterly. "Is there refuge in nightmare?"

"A nightmare can be conquered."

"If it doesn't conquer you."

Erill swam back to the beach, let the wind and the sun dry her thin body. The sea, she noted, left a taint of salt on her skin. She drew on her clothes, and went back to where Kane dug in the sand.

"Why did you seek me out, Kane?" she later had asked him.

"You are a fragment of the puzzle I sought to unravel."

"A fragment?"

"You had knowledge of the Satakis' shadow-spell."

"I know nothing of their magic."

"But you told me much."

"Are there other such fragments?"

"There were. It is a difficult puzzle. My first conception was wrong. That error was costly. I had to obtain full understanding in order to regain control."

"Then have you now solved your puzzle?"

"I have."

"And have you regained control?"

"I will."

"Can you explain it?" Erill asked on another night, as the dry wind moaned across the savannah, and shook the tent.

"Perhaps," Kane considered. "You remember when you asked me about the Lair of Yslsl?"

"I thought you jested with me."

Kane laughed mordantly.

"You said that the world was a room in a huge castle, and that Yslsl waited beyond a doorway that we could enter although Yslsl could not pass through."

"Well enough," Kane nodded. "The allegory is over simple, but it serves."

"But what has Yslsl to do with Orted Ak-Ceddi?"

"Remember that the castle is huge, limitless perhaps. There are many other rooms. Certain beings—call them demons or gods, for convenience—live in some of these other chambers. One such being is Yslsl. Another is Sataki."

Kane frowned, as if not wholly satisfied with his meta-

phor. He muttered something in a language Erill had never heard spoken—not surprisingly—then continued.

"There are many doorways such as the one in the Tower of Yslsl. The laws that govern the doorways vary, just as the beings who wait beyond differ in many ways. One of the keys to sorcery is the knowledge to open certain of these doorways, and to control and command the beings on the other side. That knowledge, carefully applied, can lead to great power; a false step means annihilation."

"Like demons and magic circles," Erill followed.

"Good," Kane approved. "Your concept of the wizard and his pentacle is valid here—although generally the wizard is evoking a being who has little interest in what takes place in this chamber we call the universe. Remember the castle is vast. Many of the dwellers beyond have no awareness of or interest in our small chamber. Others watch our universe hungrily, making the doorways to their realms as accessible as the laws of the cosmos make possible. The places of the earth where their doorways impinge soon become ill-omened and shunned by the wise."

"Like the Tower of Yslsl."

"And the Altar of Sataki beneath Ceddi—*Ceddi* is 'altar' in Old Tongue." Kane paused, shrugged. "In the cellars beneath Ceddi lies the Altar of Sataki. The Sigil of Sataki is a simulacrum of it. It's a doorway similar to the black sunburst atop the Tower of Yslsl. The priests of Sataki learned its secret many centuries ago, unearthed it, founded a degenerate cult about it."

"But who built the doorways?"

"The *che'eyl'rhy*—the beings did themselves," Kane explained. "At least that's my belief. They're structures like a spider's web, or an ant lion's burrow—only of a more complex order. Elaborately constructed snares for predators whose existence is to lure and entrap unwary prey.

"Not much knowledge of them survived. I think Yslsl and Sataki are similar entities—and that conditions in that region of Shapeli were suited for their doorways to

open close together, just as certain regions are prone to volcanic eruptions while others are not. The chief distinction is that Yslsl attracted no cult of worshippers to keep his rituals alive. Sataki did, although his cult was never of any importance."

"Until Orted espoused it," Erill murmured.

"Until Orted," Kane nodded. "And there the puzzle begins."

He was silent for a moment, listening to the voice of the wind.

"That was where I miscalculated. I knew Orted's reputation, saw that the Dark Crusade was a powerful force for conquest—and assumed Orted was using the facade of a religious war to build for himself an empire.

"I was wrong. Orted Ak-Ceddi is exactly what his priests proclaim him to be. He is a man into whose flesh their god has entered—or if you prefer, he is a man possessed by a devil."

Erill remembered her shudder at Kane's words. She shivered now at the thought, although the wind was warm, and the sea was dry on her flesh. She climbed the dune and gazed down to where Kane and his men dug about the ruins of what had once been Ashertiri, destroyed in the ancient wars with the sorcerers of Carsultyal.

"The fragments of the puzzle are scattered, hard to find," Kane had told her that night. "Much of it I can only reconstruct through conjecture, but I think I have it all now.

"The cult of Sataki was dying out. It had never been powerful, but now only a handful of fanatics kept its rituals. The priests made sacrifice to Sataki—luring victims into Ceddi, stealing children, waylaying drunks and beggars—offering them on the Altar of Sataki, intoning the spells that opened the doorway for the doomed sacrifice.

"Somehow they captured Orted. He was wounded in a raid on the Guild Fair, or they couldn't have taken him. They placed him on their altar, chanted the ritual of sacrifice. The doorway opened. Only this time, Sataki came through.

"I don't know how it happened. Under certain conditions such reversals can occur. A rare juxtaposition of the stars, perhaps; a transient flaw in the fabric of the cosmos. My guess would be that Sataki was near extinction from lack of worshippers, lack of sacrifices—ravenous, a starving lion. Orted was no ordinary man; he was physically powerful, a dynamic personality, intelligent, a leader with enormous strength of will. Either Sataki took advantage of some freak of chance to reach through the doorway—or else Orted's soul was so powerful he drew the weakened god into himself.

"The reversal lasted only a short space in time. Then the doorway closed. Only a portion of Sataki's life-force was trapped on our side of the doorway—incarnated in Orted Ak-Ceddi."

Kane smiled at a bitter jest. "Sataki stole Orted's shadow, but he cloaked him with unearthly flesh no iron can penetrate. I wondered at the absence of the Prophet's shadow, but this is not an uncommon phenomenon of the supernatural. Vampires cast neither shadow nor reflection, a trait other supernatural creatures share—nor is the trick to eliminate a shadow any difficult spell. A tawdry trick to awe the masses, I dismissed it. Nor did the Prophet's heralded invulnerability impress me. If Orted could not be harmed by any weapons, why then did he not place his invulnerable body in the fore of his battles? Another shabby artifice, so I thought—an illusion he dared not test in battle."

"But can he be wounded, then?" Erill wondered.

"Not by iron or steel," Kane said. "But he feels the impact of a blow—I've seen that. I sent assassins to his chambers, and they were armed with silver blades, lances of fire-hardened wood, stone hammers. For Orted fears some manner of weapon, or he would surely now lead his army against me."

"He will send his army of slaying shadows instead," Erill warned him.

"Not unless I let him ensnare me," Kane said. "That was the whip he used to hold me in obedience—the threat

of his shadow horde. And that was the essential fragment of the puzzle that you furnished me."

"I?"

"Certain laws and procedures must be obeyed before any act of sorcery can have power. A wizard cannot conjure forth a demon with a simple wave of his hand—no more than a warrior can slay his enemy by asking him to die. You were a pawn at Gillera, but your experience that night revealed a portion of the spell. Other pawns, other witnesses furnished more information. I knew the Satakis' shadow magic had to have restrictive limitations—else the Prophet would have needed no army to carry out his conquests."

Kane toyed with his swordhilt. "It is a variation on the rites of sacrifice, evoking minions that dwell on the threshold of Sataki's realm. It requires darkness, it requires a simulacrum of the Altar of Sataki, and it requires the evocative power of the ritual chants. At first the Satakis used it only on individuals marked for death. They hunted down a man in my employ who once had betrayed Orted; a priest followed him to Sandotneri and struck when the poor fool let darkness catch him.

"Later the cult drew power from new worshippers; they could invoke the spell upon a limited area, even smother torchlight with their power—but they sometimes had to use a pawn to place the simulacrum and to utter the final chant, when no priest or shadow-sending could get close enough to perform the task.

"Their power increased as their numbers increased. The culmination was when the Prophet himself led a horde of worshippers to destroy Sandotneri—as vengeance and as a warning. For all the horror of the unleashed shadow-army, the action was only a mass scale extension of the sacrificial rites that are chanted by a circle of priests about the Altar of Sataki."

Kane's voice was edged with triumph. "A deadly spell, but only if I were careless enough to allow the Satakis to invoke it. And I've taken careful measures to guard against that. Neither mundane assassin nor shadowy priest can approach me at night—and Orted knows my

calvary would butcher any chanting horde he tried to send against me. Jarvo taught him that lesson in a manner the Satakis won't forget."

Erill's eyes clouded at Jarvo's name.

Kane marked this, but made no comment. He knew now that Erill had sheltered Jarvo in Ingoldi. Now rumors flew that Kane's old enemy had escaped during the chaos of revolt, had reached the as yet unconquered realms of the southern kingdoms, was seeking to raise a new army to lead against Kane and Orted Ak-Ceddi.

Kane bore Erill no animosity for her part in prolonging Jarvo's annoying existence. He felt that Erill had had opportunity to reflect upon her interference, as she hung from the nails before the mob.

"What will you do now?" she had asked.

"Wait for the revolt to spread throughout Shapeli," Kane replied. "Orted can't face my army on the savannah. I've destroyed whatever elements of the former Sword of Sataki remained loyal to Sataki. I control the conquered provinces of the southern kingdoms. I can't allow Orted to live—he's too dangerous an enemy. If the people of Shapeli won't rebel and do it for me, I'll have to fight my way into his stronghold and pull it down on his head."

Kane added thoughtfully, "And that won't be easy."

"And what will Orted do?"

"Have his hands full controlling a populace whose religious zeal will cool without the threat of the Sword of Sataki. Orted took a big chance insisting that all those conquered peoples be brought into Shapeli."

"If it was a risk, why did he take it? He could have delegated their rule to territorial governors, as in any empire."

Kane laughed. "That was the final error I made in judging Orted. I'd always assumed that—fraud or fanatic—Orted's goal was an empire. It wasn't. That's why I couldn't predict his actions."

"What is his goal, then?"

"Orted's methods to power were used to attain the goal, but it was Sataki's goal all along. He needs millions of faithful souls for a final evocation. I wonder just how many

more worshippers the Prophet will require to furnish enough power to open the gateway one final time—to let Sataki come all the way through."

XXIV

Beneath the Sea of Sand

Kane clambered over the edge of the excavation, into the sandy pit below. "That's it!" he shouted. "Hold your shovels! Break that seal, and we're all dead men."

His men stood back sharply, as Kane knelt at the bottom of the excavation, began to paw through the damp sand with his fingers. They had been digging through the ruins of Ashertiri for a good week now, uncovering buried wall after sunken edifice, as Kane directed. Precisely what Kane sought here, no one was certain.

Yesterday they had unearthed what appeared to be a jumble of fused green stone. Kane exulted, directed them to dig farther down. Hours of labor revealed what evidently had been a tower of some emerald-hued ceramic substance, of which all but the very foundations had been blasted into slag by some inconceivable energy. After levering away slabs of rubble, they at length uncovered what appeared to be the buried floor of its lowest level.

Kane's excitement rose as their shovels laid bare a hexagonal slab of metal set in what had been the center of the cellar floor. Under Kane's clawing fingers was

revealed a hexagon of silver metal, some eight feet across. Barely perceptible cracks divided the hexagon into six triangular segments, and at the center, where the apices converged, was an intricate seal stamped in what might have been crimson glass.

"Leave me now," Kane told them, studying the crimson seal. His order was obeyed most willingly.

Erill gained the edge of the pit as they scrambled away. Her curiosity drove her past the retreating soldiers, and she peered into the excavation in time to see the triangular sections of the silver hexagon slide smoothly back into the stone of the floor.

Steps led downward into cold darkness. An invisible exhalation from far below swirled upward, like shimmering heat waves about glowing steel. Kane completed a complex gesture above the gaping pit—then stepped down into darkness where no living thing had entered in millennia.

Erill sensed rather than heard a menacing hiss from deep within the earth. Even Erill had a limit, and she scuttled back to where Kane's men awaited his return.

The minutes dragged past. The sun touched its zenith, began to curve downward. No one ventured closer to the excavation.

Kane returned rather suddenly, bearing with him a small casket of silver-grey metal, its hasp secured with a seal not unlike that of the door disclosed beneath the sand. Kane appeared as exhausted as any of them had ever seen the man.

"Bury it," Kane ordered. "Bury it completely."

Their shovels flung sand back into the excavation in a steady avalanche. Erill got a quick glimpse of the bottom of the pit. The silver hexagon was closed, its crimson seal unbroken. Then the sand of the dead city once more buried its secrets.

"What is it, Kane?" she asked, studying the silver-grey casket.

"Something that doesn't like shadows," Kane said.

XXV

Nemesis

They left the haunted ruins of Ashertiri the next dawn. During the night, exhausted messengers rode into camp —carrying grim news to Kane. The rumors, for a change, were true.

Jarvo had gathered a new army.

A season had passed since Kane's abortive *coup d'etat* in Ceddi. While Kane and Orted maneuvered for command of the Dark Crusade, Jarvo had been at work amidst the unconquered states of the southern kingdoms. His efforts had been most effective.

Kane had conquered half the region because the separate kingdoms could not oppose him as a united force. Centuries of internecine wars, smouldering jealousies and hatreds had kept them apart. Certain of the kingdoms had thought to ally themselves with Kane in order to destroy traditional enemies; others had found resistance to the Sword of Sataki impossible, had capitulated without battle. One by one the Dark Crusade had engulfed them.

The disruption caused by Kane's rebellion afforded the remaining kingdoms pause to consider their plight.

The excesses of the Satakis were by now too well known to allow for any consideration of peaceful alliance with the Dark Crusade. Moreover, the relentless conquests of the Sword of Sataki made it obvious even to the most thick-witted ruler that the Prophet would not halt his advance until every city had fallen to him.

Into this atmosphere of growing panic, Jarvo had forced his presence. As the general who had dealt the Satakis their only defeat—and compared to subsequent Sataki victories, the disaster at Meritavano appeared a close battle—Jarvo suddenly enjoyed immense prestige. He was a compelling figure—his features scarred, his spirit one of implacable vengeance. He had penetrated into the Prophet's very citadel, and escaped to proclaim to the world the atrocities of the Dark Crusade.

Scarred emotionally now as well as physically, Jarvo seemed a destroying angel. Crowds and councils listened to him with rapt attention. The populace saw in him a savior, the army considered him an invincible leader, rulers sought his favor and counsel.

It was the power Jarvo had always dreamed of gaining. Now that he attained it, he no longer cared.

The solution he offered was straightforward: Counter Kane's cavalry with an even greater army.

Breaking all precedent, the free states of the southern kingdoms formed a temporary alliance, the Grand Combine. Individual kingdoms massed their armies under Jarvo's command.

When word of his coming reached Kane at Ashertiri, Jarvo was advancing with an army of 200,000 men, including almost fifty regiments of heavy cavalry. It was the largest professional army ever to take to the field on this continent.

Kane could not hope to face it. The army of the Grand Combine was almost twice the strength of the Sword of Sataki at its peak. There had been constant attrition with each new conquest; now revolt had cut its strength yet further. Kane's entire army barely numbered 25,000.

Kane had no course but to run.

And because Kane needed a place to run to, he sent emissaries to Orted Ak-Ceddi.

It was a desperate move, but then it was a desperate situation. Kane knew the Combine's army would annihilate his own force if it ever came to open battle. While he could avoid battle so long as he retreated across the broad savannah, Jarvo would pursue to the end. The conquered provinces had been laid waste, stripped by the Satakis; no new provisions and supplies were forthcoming from Shapeli. Kane could only flee across a barren land, pursued by a vastly greater, better-supplied army. Kane's strength would dwindle with each league, and it would only be a matter of time before he was overtaken, crushed by a superior force.

If that much was evident, so was the subsequent fate of Shapeli. Jarvo was an implacable foe, and the Grand Combine was pledged to destroy the Dark Crusade, root and branch, and to liberate the conquered kingdoms of the eastern plains. This time the dense forests of Shapeli would be no protection—the Combine's army was too powerful to be halted, and Jarvo had sworn to reduce Ceddi to rubble. The Grand Combine would force its way into Shapeli, if they had to uproot every tree in the forest, and the Prophet's depleted army could not hope to throw them back.

Annihilation was inevitable—for Kane and for Orted Ak-Ceddi.

There was only one chance, and Kane proposed it: To make their truce and to fight the Grand Combine together.

To Kane the logic was beyond denial. If the present situation were maintained, it meant certain destruction for them both. If the warring factions of the Dark Crusade were reunited, there was a chance to wrest victory from an otherwise hopeless position.

Kane commanded 25,000 veteran troops—all that remained of the Sword of Sataki. Orted Ak-Ceddi, counting in the Defenders of Sataki, could probably muster three times that number of trained and fully equipped foot soldiers. Drawing upon the Sataki horde, the Prophet could raise a militia of hundreds of thousands—the crucial

point being one of supplying effective arms to enough men who could be trusted not to turn against the Sataki hierarchy.

In the open, such an unwieldy coalition would stand no chance against the might of the Grand Combine. Within the forest, it was a different matter. Jarvo could only advance as fast as the conditions would allow. Presumably he would force a spearhead along the military road into Ingoldi, clearing trees to expand his march, laying waste to towns and strongholds in his path.

The Sataki militia could not stand against the Combine's troops in battle—poorly equipped rabble were sword-meat for trained soldiers. Kane's proposal was to use the militia as a constant harassing force to slow the Combine's advance—driving them in suicidal waves against Jarvo's troops as they cut through the forest. As such, they could do little damage, but men under attack cannot fell trees. While the slaughter would be appalling, Jarvo's advance would bog down, his troops would be exhausted by the time he finally reached Ingoldi. There, from the protection of the city's fortifications, Kane could coordinate an effective defense, using the Prophet's infantry to hold the walls, counterattacking with his cavalry force.

If all went well, Kane knew he had a good chance of withstanding Jarvo's siege, forcing the Combine's army to withdraw—and once in retreat, the invading army could be decimated as it pulled back through the hostile forestland. If so, it would be more than simply staving off extinction—it would be a matter of winner take all. For the kingdoms of the west had staked everything on the army of the Grand Combine; if Kane defeated Jarvo's invasion, it would leave the whole of the southern kingdoms open to conquest by the Dark Crusade.

Thus everything hung in balance for the Dark Crusade. The logic of war was evident. Under these circumstances, Kane was certain Orted Ak-Ceddi would agree to the proposed truce.

Orted agreed.

"Can we trust him, though?" Alain protested.

"We can trust Orted for the same reason that he must

trust me," Kane answered. "Because each of us depends on the other if he is to stay alive."

He paused, remembering. "There was a time that I went into a tavern to kill a man. We were rivals, blood-enemies—sworn to kill the other on sight. He was good; I couldn't take him at once. While we were fighting, the tavern was surrounded, the city guard rushed in. They were sworn to kill us both on sight.

"And so we fought back to back, he and I—while the guard tore at us both. Neither of us feared a treacherous blow from the other, for the guard would instantly cut down either of us alone. We killed maybe twenty of them, before the handful that were left broke and fled."

"And after that?" Alain prompted.

"Afterward," said Kane, smiling at the memory, "I killed him."

XXVI

Desperado

A thunderhead of dust towered above the horizon, following Kane relentlessly as he retreated toward Shapeli —as if he fled before a storm of inconceivable fury. Jarvo was pursuing hard on their trail, crushing all that did not flee. Kane managed to outdistance his nemesis, but only by holding to a pace that killed horses and left his men hanging to their saddles as drowning sailors cling to broken timbers. Kane wondered if the Combine's cavalry fared any better; probably they did—having set out with fresh mounts and full provisions.

The time lost in arranging the truce with Orted Ak-Ceddi was of itself almost Kane's undoing. The Combine advanced at a speed Kane had not imagined possible for so vast an army—even considering that Jarvo rode unchecked by the terrain and without fear of ambush. As for pursuing Kane, once the Combine's army converged on his trail, it was only a matter of following the swath of trampled earth and the litter of dead mounts and abandoned gear. A day's lead dwindled like wax in flame as the killing race stretched on. By the time they reached

the forest, Kane doubted that Jarvo was more than a handful of hours behind.

No use now to think of tearing up the roadway, of throwing barricades and ambuscades in Jarvo's path. Too late to organize resistance—time only to ride headlong for Ingoldi. Sleep in your saddle, stuff handfuls of whatever is left to eat in your mouth as you ride. Horses have to stop for food and water and rest; men don't. No more fresh mounts, and every dead horse means a dead man when the Combine catches up. Ride on for Ingoldi, and pray its walls won't be your tomb.

After Sembrano, on the forest edge, Kane was able to stretch his lead over Jarvo. Ingoldi was a ride of several days from the border and through hostile territory for the army of the Grand Combine. Jarvo had to funnel his gigantic body of troops into the forest-spanning military roads, wary of ambushes and pockets of resistance that did not exist. His objective was secure and his enemy bottled up. Jarvo would slow his pace to save horses and men for the impending assault on Ingoldi.

Let the quarry run itself to exhaustion. Now that the end of the hunt was at hand, it made little difference to Jarvo whether he reached Ingoldi this day or the next. The battle could have but one outcome.

Kane grimly watched the gates of Ingoldi close behind the last of his haggard horsemen. It was afternoon, and his men had ridden through the night. With luck, Kane estimated they would have as long as the next day to prepare for the Combine's assault. Jarvo could not have carried siege engines with him at this pace. It would take days to construct such weapons, and if Orted's soldiers could hold the walls until then, Kane's men and horses should be rested enough to make a sortie.

Not that any sortie would break Jarvo's siege, Kane mused, but such tactics—lightning raids, then a dash back within the walls—could inflict costly casualties, destroy the Combine's new siege equipment. The best hope for them now would be to seek to hold out until the Prophet could summon his followers from the out-

lying cities of Shapeli. A peasant army could threaten Jarvo's rear, if their number were great enough. In time, the Combine's army might be crushed between two fronts.

Kane wondered whether the Prophet's followers would answer such a call—or whether those beyond Ingoldi would wish Jarvo luck in crushing a vicious tyrant.

An honor guard of Defenders of Sataki approached him. Their leader informed Kane that the Prophet awaited him in Ceddi.

"Don't go!" Erill whispered.

Kane grinned tiredly. "We have to coordinate our defensive strategy before Jarvo comes to add his voice. I'll get some rest afterward."

"Hell, you know what I mean. Don't trust him."

Kane looked at her, shrugged. "Orted knows we have to fight together if there's any chance at all. If he means treachery, he'll have to hurry before Jarvo puts an end to our quarrel.

"Alain, I'll need you with me. Dolnes, you know the city." He called off others of his staff, added: "And I'm sure Orted won't object if my personal guard rides in with me."

"Kane," Erill said. "Take me."

"Why?"

"Why not? I've ridden this far."

"As you wish." Kane had never asked the girl why she stayed with him during the gruelling race. She might have gone her own way, or remained in one of the towns along their retreat. He knew she felt neither love nor gratitude toward him, nor had she cause to. Erill was too hard to show any emotion, not even fear. She only wanted to be in at the kill.

Kane's officers led their exhausted men to their former barracks, to try to catch a few hours rest before the coming battle. Kane, accompanied by what remained of his personal regiment, followed Orted's honor guard into Ceddi.

The Prophet received him graciously. Their meeting was no more cordial than form required. They had discussed strategy and tactics on many a previous occasion—

each knowing that their alliance must end in only one way. This occasion was no different.

It was growing dark by the time they ended their conference. Orted had agreed to all of Kane's proposals—evidently content to place the conduct of the defense in his hands, just as he had earlier entrusted the direction of the Sword of Sataki to Kane. That suited Kane, who had feared interference.

Food and drink had been served to the council, and to Kane's tired guard in the courtyard below. Sleep seemed most imperative now, and Kane decided it was time to find his quarters. He stood up to return to his men, wondering as he made his excuses what had become of Erill.

Esketra lay in her scented bath, watching the sheen of bubbles as they swirled and shattered. Her rich black hair was piled in thick coils, held in place with golden pins. She would wash it again in the morning, let her handmaidens brush the silken tresses, soothingly work in the perfumed oils. Now it was evening, and she did not wish to wait for it to dry before going to Orted.

The Prophet had been in a strange mood these last few days, she mused, trailing her fingers over her soft white skin. He was in a state of repressed excitement—more like a man who envisions the fulfillment of some long-cherished goal, rather than a ruler whose empire is teetering on the edge of utter ruin. Perhaps Kane's return to Ingoldi had rekindled Orted's confidence in his ultimate victory.

Victory. Against the invincible army that Jarvo was leading against them. Rumors said it was the greatest army ever amassed, that this newly formed Grand Combine would overwhelm Ingoldi's walls as a wave washes over a child's sandcastles, that their orders were to spare no living soul of the Prophet's Dark Crusade. Those noochees who repeated such lies in the hearing of the faithful were very shortly in better need of their breath. Still the atmosphere of impending doom did not clear.

Perhaps she had been wrong in joining her fortunes

to those of Orted Ak-Ceddi. But who could ever have imagined that little toad Jarvo as a threat to the awesome power of the Prophet? What if Jarvo did destroy Ingoldi? What would he do to her?

Esketra smiled, remembering his stupid, fawning worship of her. She would cry, hint at horrid cruelties, and Scarface Jarvo would puff out his chest and play the savior. One tear from her eye, one glimpse of her beauty, one promise of a kiss from her red lips—and little Jarvo would kneel at her feet. Then let the gods guess who was conqueror and who the slave. The fortunes of war hung in balance, but for Esketra it would mean victory however the balance might swing.

It was time to dress. She rose from her golden tub, reaching for a towel. Her handmaidens should be here - where were the little bitches loitering? Angrily Esketra called for them, dabbing at her sleek skin with her towel.

Someone entered her bath. When she lowered the towel from her face, Esketra saw that it was not one of her servants.

It was a scrawny girl in dirty riding clothes, her face streaked with dust and sweat, lined with fatigue. Her eyes were green as a cat's.

"What are you doing in here!" Esketra demanded.

"I bring a message from Jarvo," the strange girl said, stepping forward cat-quick.

"Jarvo!" By the gods, had he already entered the city!

"Jarvo sends you his love," the girl said, extending her hand.

Esketra glanced to see what the girl had to give her.

It was a poniard.

As he left the council chambers, Kane wearily paused at a tower window. It was dark now, he noted. Tomorrow would probably bring the army of the Grand Combine to Ingoldi's walls Before then, some rest. He would need all his strength if he were yet to stave off defeat. The chances were bleak, but he had survived far worse.

Absently Kane gazed out across the city. His eyes narrowed. Smoke and flame already flared into the night.

A quarter near the wall was ablaze. Surely not Jarvo already . . .

Kane cursed. Those were his barracks that were afire. His men . . . In the distance he could hear the dull animal roar of the attacking mob.

"Alain!" Kane shouted. "Get the others! We're riding out! Now!"

A sweep of Kane's arm, and his sword flamed in his left fist. Already they were alone in the hallway—the Prophet's counselors had discreetly withdrawn as they left the upper chambers. Kane had been in this situation too often not to realize what portended.

A rush carried them into the great hall—ominously deserted. The main door stood invitingly open—leading into the courtyard, where Kane's personal guard should await his return. Not daring to hope that Orted had been an instant too slow in closing his trap, Kane plunged into the darkened courtyard.

His men were lounging about the enclosure. They gave a startled greeting as Kane and his officers burst out of the great hall with drawn blades.

"Mount up!" Kane shouted. "We're getting out of here fast!"

As if to mock his command, the massive iron portcullis of the main gate crashed down with a thunderous knell. Behind Kane, the iron-bound doors of the great hall slammed shut with a clash of bolts.

Kane spun a glance about the courtyard. The few small doors that led back into the towering citadel were closed as well. Short of forcing the gate or scaling the fifty foot walls, they were trapped within the courtyard.

Laughter tumbled down from a tower window. Orted's laughter. Kane saw the Prophet silhouetted high above, gloating from his tower window.

"Are you in such a hurry to leave, Kane?" the Prophet jeered. "You must not miss the evening's crowning spectacle!"

"Orted, you bloody fool!" Kane yelled up at him. "Have you gone completely mad!"

"No, Kane!" the Prophet roared. "You're the fool this

night! Have you forgotten the warning I gave you at Sandotneri?"

"You're insane, Orted! You need me to defend your city from Jarvo!"

"Jarvo will die on another night, Kane—when he tries his steel on my shadow horde! He rides to his doom, even as you have already ridden to yours! Fools, did you think you could intrude upon the Altar of Sataki with impunity! Were you mad to think I could ever forgive your treachery to Sataki, Kane? You and your traitor band are all inuchiri—and you know the penalty you must pay for that sin!"

"Orted, you're mad! You'll destroy us both!"

"Wrong, Kane! I'll feed the shadow horde instead—on your souls tonight, and on the souls of Jarvo's proud army on another night! Then let the world shudder before the might of Sataki!"

Kane's men milled desperately about the enclosure, as the Prophet's taunts and laughter echoed across the court. The trap was a solid one. Given time, Kane knew they could batter down one of the interior doors, storm the barbican and raise the portcullis. They would not be given time.

Already the dread chanting of the priests reached the ears of the doomed soldiers. Orted had only held them here to await the fall of night, so that his priests could invoke the spell that summoned the slaying shadows. The evocation would not take long.

Kane ignored the Prophet's triumphant laughter. Kane had made a final error. He had assumed he was dealing with a rational mind, with Orted the bandit chieftain, who would have to agree to the logic of Kane's proposed alliance. Instead he dealt with a vengeful god.

Kane lunged for Angel, dug into the saddlebags, as the black stallion pranced nervously. The tension in the night was like the aura before a lightning storm.

His fingers touched a carefully wrapped packet. Moving with reckless haste, Kane tore away the rolls of padding - revealed the silver-grey casket he had taken such pains to obtain from the buried ruins of Ashertiri, knowing he

must someday destroy Orted Ak Ceddi, or be himself destroyed. He had hoped for other circumstances than these in which he was now ensnared, but there would be no other chance.

Chanting an invocation as he worked, Kane snapped the crimson seal that locked the casket's hasp. He felt power stir within the metal box. Deadly power, but Kane would take Orted with him.

Tendrils of blue light were already seeping through the airtight cover of the silvery casket. Kane had no need to warn his men to stand clear. Shouting out a spell in a tongue far older than lost Ashertiri, Kane stalked across the *enceinte* toward the citadel's central tower. He seemed to hold a blue-white star in his outstretched hands. Even though he cast the spell, Kane felt the skin of his hands sear from the power that stirred within the casket.

Averting his face, Kane shouted a final phrase, flung the metal casket away from him. Already a square of glowing silver, the ancient box exploded in an incandescent ball as it fell through the air. Kane leapt backward, praying that his spell would control the awesome force he had set free.

The courtyard crackled with a stark, searing light—brighter than the sun. A star seemed to explode against the base of the citadel wall. Horses reared in unmanageable fright. Men flung arms across singed faces.

Bathed in an aura of elemental flame, the salamander stretched its swelling limbs and stared lazily about.

Kane shouted a command in the tongue of the wizards who millennia ago had imprisoned the fire elemental. Slowly the salamander turned about, heeding the potent phrases. Its grotesque head swiveled toward the stone wall, and it waddled forward in obedience to Kane's command.

Elemental flame touched stone, and the wall erupted in a spraying fountain of lava. The salamander stalked forward into the gap. Molten globs of stone tumbled upon its obscenely bloated form—dissolved into incandescent fragments from the unearthly heat of its elemental substance. Dragging its tail like a loathsome comet, the fire

elemental burrowed its way into the heart of the fortress, digging a molten path toward Ceddi's hidden cellars.

The chanting of the priests, Orted's gloating laughter—all ceased. Half-blinded by the incandescent flame, Kane's men now listened to the terror-stricken shrieks of those within Ceddi. The salamander had disappeared into the lower depths of the colossal fortress. From its glowing burrow, blue-white flame stabbed into the night.

"Keep close to the outer wall!" Kane warned. "I'm not sure what will happen when it . . ."

And in the hidden fane of the Satakis, the salamander crawled forth to find the Altar of Sataki—as Kane had commanded. And Kane commanded the salamander to destroy . . .

Elemental flame lashed out at the alien stone. For an instant the black mirror reflected a white-hot circle of energy—behind which *something* seemed to stir, to reel back in agony . . .

The stones of the courtyard seemed to leap upward beneath their feet. The fury of an exploding star seemed to burst from deep within the earth. Men and horses tumbled head over heels, flung to the ground in a terrified mass of stunned and bleeding flesh. Behind them, a section of the courtyard wall buckled outward into the moat.

Like a child's castle of blocks, Ceddi's central tower crumpled inward upon the seething mass of flame and molten rock that was until seconds ago the eons-old temple of a god who dwelt there no more.

For an eternity, stones seemed to crash down and down and down. Explosive echoes tore apart the night. Then a moment of utter stillness—before ears deafened by the holocaust began to hear the anguished shrieks and crackle of flames from within the sundered fortress. In the distance, frightened shouts called from streets where darkness now returned.

A third of Ceddi was rubble. Kane noted with chagrin that the Prophet's tower yet stood, tilted from the blast. But Orted would laugh no more. His god had forsaken him.

There was no hope now except in headlong flight. Kane

pulled himself to his feet, relieved to see that Angel had escaped injury as well. Not all of his guard had been so lucky.

Kane swung astride the black stallion, unsheathed his blade from the scabbard at his shoulder. "All right, you bloody bastards!" he growled. "Off your butts, and let's ride! We're not wanted here any longer, and you won't want to wait around to complain to Jarvo for your back pay!"

When the explosion flung her off her feet, Erill had been calculating her chances in slipping past the guards at a rear gate of the fortress. She had decided her chances were about zero—but that it would not be much longer before someone looked to see what lay beneath the scarlet waters of the golden bath. While Erill was not worried about the consequences of her action, now that she had carried out her little vengeance, she had no particular desire to make atonement.

The blast flung her about as an angry child throws her doll. Luck and her training as an acrobat saved her a broken neck. The guards at the gate had neither advantage.

Not bothering to speculate, Erill was dashing through the wreckage even before the earth ceased its heaving. She kept running through the frightened confusion in the streets beyond the citadel. By the time her legs were aching from the strain, she had reached the city wall.

The ramparts were manned by the dead. Orted had ordered the bulk of his troops to attack Kane's cavalry regiments as they slept in their barracks. Only a skeleton force had been left to man the city walls. Jarvo had been closer on Kane's heels than Orted had gambled.

Erill clung to the shadows, studying the battle with an experienced eye. The dead men on the wall were struck down by arrows—probably in the first moments of the assault. Coming upon a city torn apart by treachery and unleashed sorceries, Jarvo had attacked instantly with only the vanguard of his troops. Now the battle appeared to be centered at the main gates further. From the signs, it ap-

peared that the Combine's army had already forced entry. In that case, Ingoldi, Ceddi, the Satakis, and the Dark Crusade were doomed.

It amused Erill. The world was crashing into final and utter chaos. It seemed she had survived.

An abandoned watchtower was not likely to be disturbed again this night. Erill slipped within, opened the cannister of powdered coca leaves she had plundered from Esketra's chambers. It was the final act of the game, and she had a splendid view.

Kane had ridden only a short way, when the full realization of the disaster struck him.

The city was in arms against the noochee traitors of Kane's cavalry. Bloodied bands of his men met him as he rode—telling gruesome tales of massacre. Not suspecting suicidal treachery from the Satakis, Kane's exhausted men had flung themselves down and slept soundly. Orted's soldiers had set fire to the barracks, slaughtered the cavalrymen as they stumbled forth from the smoke and turmoil.

For all that, Kane's men were hardened fighters, and quick to grasp their danger. Frantic knots of men had broken through the trap, enough to swing certain massacre into a pitched battle. With the city raised against them, the desperate mercenaries had rushed the main gate, thinking to escape into the forest. In the darkness and chaos of battle, they had not realized they were only opening the city gate to Jarvo's army.

Reeling back from this new attack, Kane's once invincible army was cut apart and ground under. The Combine's troops were slaying all within the city—while the fanatical Satakis were determined to slay the noochee traitors to the last man.

Kane was trapped in a vice, and the jaws were closing too rapidly for escape. There was a shaky chance to survive if they could retreat across Ingoldi, force the rear gate, and reach the forest. The Combine's troops could never hunt down all the scattered fugitives. Some might escape, eventually flee to less hostile lands.

Then new word from the other bands of stragglers. Orted Ak-Ceddi, injured by falling stone but still deadly, had ordered the fanatical Satakis to destroy Kane and all that remained of his army—to sell their lives that not a single inuchiri traitor should escape the dying city.

Ahead of them, Jarvo and the army of the Grand Combine. Behind, the Sataki fanatics who had escaped the holocaust.

Death glowed in Kane's eyes as he turned to what remained of his command. The men knew their doom was upon them, but waited to learn if Kane could pull off one last miracle.

"Let's see if there's any wine left for us in Ceddi," Kane growled. "Then I'll see you all in hell—and let's make certain the place is crowded."

They wheeled their mounts about, and rode back through the death-laden streets of Ingoldi, toward the smouldering wreckage of Ceddi. A last few hundred soldiers—all that remained of the powerful Sword of Sataki. Exhausted, wounded, armed with whatever weapons they'd had time to seize, wearing mail and odd pieces of plate armor—riding horses equally battle-weary. They were professionals who had lived their lives by the sword.

And this was the last battle.

They drove off the milling townspeople as they rode—frightened fools who had been caught up in a nightmare beyond their understanding and beyond their control. They fled, and found death elsewhere.

Kane's men did not have to ride far to come upon the mass of Sataki fanatics who trailed them. No time for thought, no time for fine points. Kane spurred Angel, and they hit the Satakis at a gallop.

The night became a nightmare of smoke and stench, of flashing steel and snarling faces, of blood and sweat, of tiny wounds you barely felt over the ache of fatigued muscles. The wound that counted was the one you never felt at all.

Kane drove through them like a vengeful juggernaut, until Angel's frothy flanks were as drenched in blood as

his crushing hooves. Men rushed at Kane, and Kane struck at them, smashing them to the earth with as little thought as a harvester wields his scythe. Their blades and bare fists tore at him, gouged flesh, chewed apart his mail hauberk. A flung stone carried off Kane's helmet, and a suicidal assailant tore away his buckler by dragging it down as his fellows chopped at Kane's arm. Carsultyal broadsword in his left hand, Kane caught up a cavalry sabre in his right. It was no longer a matter of slash, thrust, and parry; it was kill and kill and kill until death put an end to even berserker rage.

One by one, Kane's men went down. He no longer saw their faces either. Kane was beyond grief or anger. Emotion required energy, and Kane's entire being was concentrated on destruction.

They had reached the leaning walls of Ceddi now—Kane and the last of his personal guard. The Satakis would not fall back before them; they had to cut a path through them each step of the way. They were but a handful now, but the Sataki dead were like drift in the wash of a flood. Red-coated Defenders, black-robed priests, peasants and city dwellers—one united by fanaticism, united now by death.

Kane had but one great wish—to reach Orted and tear his black heart out with his bare hands. But Orted was not with the last of his faithful. Nor was he in Ceddi, when Kane forced his way into the ruined fortress. Kane knew where Orted would be. The Prophet had ordered his fanatics to throw away their lives in holding the battle away from Ceddi —while with characteristic cunning, Orted Ak-Ceddi had fled with whatever he might carry off.

That knowledge drove Kane to new fury. It was one thing to die in a hopeless battle; it was another to know that the enemy whose mad treachery had brought this doom upon him was making good his escape.

Kane reeled in his saddle, fatigue and a score of wounds leeching his strength. He was a lion, being pulled down by a horde of rats. He slew all in his reach, but there was

a limit even to Kane's endurance, and his enemies were beyond numbering.

An instant's lull in the battle gave Kane pause to see that there were new foemen in Ceddi. The first wave of the Combine's army had swept through the city, the invaders were now streaming into the ruined citadel. Kane slew them with the same impartial efficiency he slaughtered the Satakis.

Spurring Angel out of the overrun courtyard, Kane saw that Ceddi was encircled. Jarvo's army, little concerned as to what awesome force had shattered the Prophet's fortress, was pouring over the last of the Sataki fanatics. And as Kane looked about, he saw the last of his personal guard had fallen.

No time to draw breath, let alone for contemplation. Kane charged into the Satakis who mindlessly clawed at him. A child rolled under Angel's hooves, thrusting with a spear. Angel screamed and crumpled—throwing Kane over his neck. Kane landed on his feet, cut the boy in half with a backward slash.

For an instant the mob closed over him. Kane's two blades flickered like crimson flame. They fell back from him, torn and reeling. Kane staggered away, bleeding from yet more wounds. He fought his way along the fortress wall, using it to guard his back. On foot the end was imminent.

There was a note of savage hatred in the shout—enough to draw Kane's attention to its source. Jarvo.

Kane snarled defiance. His enemy had recognized him from the light of the burning fortress.

In a frenzy, Jarvo was trying to cut through the melee that separated them. On horseback, armored, with his men about him, Jarvo would ride him down like a dog.

Kane lurched backward, wondering if he might seize a riderless horse. He was a dead man trapped here in the open.

Then darker shadow touched him like a chill breath as he turned. He had fought his way to the Tower of Yslsl.

Even in the rush of battle, the tower stood empty, its door standing open—a few bodies close by. Why venture

within? There was no place to hide, not even a way to defend it.

Jarvo's shout, and the clash of hooves. In another instant it would all be over. Kane wondered if he could take Jarvo with him. No chance. Jarvo was too good a warrior, and Kane was too cut up even to get out of the way.

The doorway beckoned. There was a second, stranger doorway within, at the head of the stairs . . .

Kane had often wondered. How true were the legends? Could he remember how the doorway was to be opened?

It was hard to think any longer. Hard even to stand up.

Another second, and he could rest.

Kane stumbled through the doorway, heaved the iron-bound door shut, worked the stiff bolts even as the ancient door shook to an impact.

Kane steadied himself against the cool darkness. Were there stars far overhead? If so, they were spinning.

The door thudded under new impacts. Dimly he could hear Jarvo's angry voice, shouting for a ram.

Kane began to climb the stairs.

XXVII

In the Lair of Yslsl

One instant the stench of the burning city, the cool fusty smell of the ancient tower . . . One instant the chaotic roar of the battle below, the inexorable smash of the ram against the splintering tower door . . . One instant the hard pressure of Kane's gore-streaked flesh against the cold black sunburst of stone . . .

Then the cold was all around him, and he was engulfed in infinite darkness. Kane was falling . . . Blind mote of consciousness falling timelessly . . .

And something thrust a thousand ice-tendrils into his soul . . .

Never . . . From nothingness the ice-whisper crawled through his consciousness . . . *Never shall I have feasted as now* . . .

HUNGER

And substance emerged from nihility . . .

Kane was in a passageway—greylit, its edges cobwebby vague, reminding him unpleasantly of a spider's tunnel-

web. His steps drifted dreamily forward, silently, without volition. Ahead of him the corridor stretched grey and endless. Behind him—he slowly forced his head around . . .

Behind him the corridor dissolved into emptiness—a precipice upon infinity that followed upon each step. Unbidden his feet groped forward, and the precipice slid a step closer. There seemed to be stars glowing far below in that abyss . . .

Kane fought vertigo and shuffled forward . . .

The polar bear reared in the ice-cavern. Its angry cough rumbled into a challenging roar as its wrathful eyes recognized the intruder. With deceptive clumsiness the bear rolled toward him on its hind legs. Its taloned paws reached out to crush him to its furry chest.

Reacting automatically, Kane ducked the lethal swing of its forepaws. He darted back from the bear's rush, and his boots skidded into emptiness. With catlike agility he flung himself clawing forward onto the ice-ledge. For an instant he skidded toward the edge—then his desperate fingers clutched cracks in the glacier. He struggled back onto the ledge, and his thrashing boots sheared away clods of rotted ice that fell silently into the abyss, into the mists that shrouded the glacier's base a thousand feet below.

The polar bear shuffled forth from its lair even as Kane scrambled to his feet on the narrow ledge. Kane felt for swordhilt, but the scabbard hung empty. His knife remained at his belt—but against half a ton of feral strength . . .

The ledge snaked along the misty palisades—too narrow, too slippery for escape.

The bear towered above him. Kane snarled, and the blade was a blue flicker as he lunged.

Almost three hundred pounds of human muscle and bone slammed into a thousand pounds of white-furred beast, and the impact staggered the bear's killing rush. Kane's dirk, a foot of honed steel, sliced hilt-deep into the beast's massive chest. Kane twisted the blade free—

a rib had turned it from the heart. A gout of blood washed over blade and hilt, made it slippery as he stabbed again against the crimson-blotched chest.

Then tearing claws, finger-length, spike-tipped, made tatters of his thick fur cloak and leather vest, gored through the flesh of his shoulders and back. Kane hissed in agony, stabbed yet again with his blade. Breath shuddered from his lungs as the awesome forepaws began to enclose him in an irresistible death-hug. Teeth champed into his shoulder, numbing one arm.

Howling against the pain, Kane hacked his blade yet again, deeper still into the gore-matted shaggy chest. Blood shimmered mistily on the ice about them; mist pulsed a roaring throb in his skull.

Something else was in his skull . . . Something that fed . . .

The polar bear coughed and relaxed its fangs, spraying blood from its black-tongued muzzle—blood that was not Kane's. It sagged against him suddenly, dragging the man down beneath its gigantic bulk. The blood-slick daggerhilt tore away from Kane's grasp. Ripping forepaws still hugged him in a lethal embrace, but now their strength seemed less irresistible.

Kane desperately writhed from under the toppling bear, sliding toward its haunches as it sprawled forward against him. The mortally wounded polar bear pitched slackly toward the edge, hung for a long moment struggling feebly against overbalance, then slid like an avalanche over the ice-ledge and into the silent mists that waited far below.

Kane stumbled forward.

He was in a cavern, damp and smelling of carrion. Gelatinous fungi leaked wan, phosphorescent light onto the dripping stalactites. The floor was treacherous with slime and foetid pools of uncertain depth. Cold water drenched his bare flesh, as he sloshed along the passage. The broken chains on his bloody wrists clanked dismally.

He barely remembered that crimson instant of in-

tolerable rage when the hopeless note of her disappearing screams had driven him mad, and the rusted chains that shackled him to the stone had snapped like rotted cord.

For worm-twisted miles he had followed the mocking echoes of her cries, bleak despair smothering the fires of his wrath. Those who had left him here—had they purposefully let her come to him to attempt hopeless rescue?

A pale figure sprawled in the pool just ahead. Kane plunged toward it recklessly, knowing at once the familiar lithe figure and ash-blonde hair. He called her name.

Vacant eyes stared up at him from a slime-crushed face. But the consummate horror was that she still lived . . .

Recognition seemed to light in her stark eyes as he knelt beside her mutilated form. His fingers pressed her lacerated neck, and there was only horror on her slack features.

Its attack was silent—dropping from the gloom above where it had climbed on its suckered limbs. Feral instinct cut through Kane's grief, and he sprang away at the last instant. The great hump of rubbery flesh grazed his naked skin as he twisted, but its murderous leap had missed him.

Stagnant water sprayed, and the devil-leech recoiled from its leap—its springy form unshaken by the drop. It reared upright like a man—like a child's mud statue of a man. Stubby legs and arms ended in sucker-tipped knots of appendages like outsize maggots, and its underbelly was slimily undulant as a slug's underside. Above its thick shoulders its neckless head hunched forward like a cobra's hood. Malevolent intelligence gleamed in its squid eyes, set far back of its outthrust suckered maw.

The devil-leech sprang for him, its ungainly bulk uncoiling suddenly from its fall as if driven by steel springs. Kane's footing failed on the fungus-smeared stone, as he tried to fend off its attack. In an overwhelming rush of cold, blubbery muscle, the devil-leech was upon him.

Kane grunted and struggled for a grip on the rubbery bulk. His fingers slithered uselessly on the slimy flesh, fighting the clutch of the demon's suckered paws. Its relentless mass squeezed against his squirming flesh, crushing him to a jelly-like carpet of fungi. Kane thrashed

about with desperate strength, trying to tear away. He succeeded only in wriggling deeper into a stagnant pool; foul water sprayed over his gasping face, choking him.

Toothed and suckered like a giant lamprey's mouth, the devil-leech's maw sought his throat. Kane's fingers tore futilely as the cobra-hood head hunched downward. The foot-wide circular mouth with its rasp-toothed writhing tongues bore down, down . . .

His hands slipped, and the devil-leech's stubby arms suddenly pinned him down. The lamprey-maw darted for him. Kane writhed. The suctioning mouth fastened on his bare chest.

A thousand dull knives rasped into his flesh, as the circular mouth shredded the flesh of his chest. Scarlet welled for an instant, and then the hideous suction was tearing at his soul. Kane screamed.

Feeding feeding something else is feeding . . .

The mindless rage that had earlier snapped iron surged through him again. Bellowing in fury, Kane recoiled with all his enormous strength. His arms tore free. His frantic fingers ripped the feeding mouth from his chest. Blood spread from the circle of macerated flesh. A circle like those that blotched her white, still flesh.

Kane flung up his knees and sent the devil-leech floundering back from him. He sprang to his feet—howling a one-noted roar of hate. Naked, bare-handed, he leapt upon the creature—this demon that had bloated on uncounted sacrifices in its foetid lair. His powerful hands gripped fast on either side of the devil's maw. The file-edged tongues gashed his fingers to the bone; the rubbery lips writhed to clamp shut. Kane set his grip and pulled, throwing his huge shoulders into the effort.

Boneless flesh stretched to the utmost. The devil-leech tried to wriggle away from the madman. Splits cracked into strained flesh, widened—then with a gathering wrench tore open. Black blood gushed forth as if from a putrid wound, covering his arms.

Kane laughed, somehow keeping his death-grip on the leathery rasp-toothed jaws. He pulled all the harder, tearing the boneless flesh apart as a man might part a

coconut hull. He stood in a pool of gore now, as the devil-leech's efforts to escape grew ever weaker. Arteries —if the demon had blood of its own—must have parted. An ocean of foulness welled up from its ruined throat as Kane's mad laughter echoed through the cavern . . .

But he was walking through the cavern again. No, it was a corridor—a dank passageway of coarse stone blocks. The passage was unlighted; the darkness close and foul with the stench of unwashed bodies. Kane's hands seemed dragged down; his gait was a clanking hobble. Massive chains shackled him.

Kane tried to halt, and the iron collar at his neck snapped his head forward. There were soldiers ahead of him, leading him by his chains. He had not seen them at once in the thick gloom. Trying to think. Kane let them jerk him forward along the passageway. Except for a scrap of rag, he was naked—his body scored with half-closed wounds. Pain and fatigue made his legs all but too weak to bear his weight.

Bolts clashed; hinges groaned. An iron-bound door was thrust open. Torchlight spilled into the passage. Kane blinked stupidly, blinded by the sudden light as his captors hauled him within.

The familiar, hated profile of Jarvo greeted him from within. The stocky general was seated in a low-backed chair beside a glowing brazier. A swordhilt protruded from the smouldering coals. His one good eye was alight with triumph, and his youthful face—the side not immobilized by scar—was twisted into a smile. Not wholly cloaked by shadow, the chamber's gleaming instruments of torture waited behind him.

Jarvo grunted in satisfaction. "So you're conscious again, Kane—or have you only feigned delirium these past hours?"

"Hours?" Kane heard his voice ask. His thoughts struggled for clarity. How was he here? Delirium . . . ?

"So you'll pretend not to know?" Jarvo considered him thoughtfully. "Perhaps you don't. As a ploy, it's pointless. Yes, hours—more than a full day since the final battle.

Since my men and I broke through into that old tower where you'd sought to hide. You were lying there senseless, half dead from your wounds. Had you thought to make a last stand there, Kane? Then you'll regret you didn't use your last strength to fall on your sword. My surgeons staunched your wounds, nursed life back into you with their elixirs."

"Why?"

Jarvo's scarred face sneered wrathfully. He clawed at his seared profile. "Have you forgotten so soon, Kane? Did you think to escape with so easy a death? Orted Ak-Ceddi slipped from my grasp, but our people will at least see justice meted to you! You, Kane—you, his general who forged the sword by which the demon-cult of Sataki terrorized our lands!"

His voice, which had started to rise, now fell, its tone deceptively calm. "When I was chosen to lead the Combine's armies, I swore I'd pull the Prophet's fortress down on the bodies of his crazed priesthood, that I'd hang a follower of Sataki from every tree in Shapeli, and that Orted and his henchmen would die in agony before the eyes of my army. Well, Ceddi lies in ruin, the carrion crows are feasting the forest—and though Orted has eluded me, his general is my prisoner!"

Jarvo came to his feet, his good eye staring at Kane's face. "In a few hours it will be dawn. At dawn you will be dragged into the central square. There before my victorious army your limbs will be broken on the wheel, your skin will be flayed from your flesh, and, after a time, you will be burned at the stake. My torturers are artists; they assure me that with stimulant drugs and careful work you may live until nightfall."

Jarvo's hand blurred toward the smouldering brazier, came away with the sword—its blade white-hot from the coals. His voice cracked with hate. "And here's something to think on through the night!"

Kane tried to fling his head aside. Chains held him. Glowing steel slashed across Kane's face, cauterizing as it sheared through smoking flesh. Agony forced a hiss through his clenched teeth. The stench of his burning

flesh choked him. Kane sagged backward, one half of his face a charred and bleeding horror.

"I return your favor," Jarvo growled, "and leave you one eye to see. Take him back to his cell."

Half-blinded, sick with pain, Kane scarcely was aware as his captors dragged him to his cell, flung him inside and locked the ponderous door. Weighed down with chains, he sprawled on the filthy stones of the pitch-dark cell. Agony lanced his skull. Jarvo's quick slash had torn away his ear, laid open his face to bare bone, split open one eye like a burst egg.

In a few hours they would come for him. He would die a hideous lingering death—humiliated before his enemies. They would gloat on his suffering, laugh at the screams of agony even Kane's iron will would not be able to lock in. And there was no hope of escape. Shackled, half-dead from his wounds, helpless in the grasp of his victorious enemies, not a man left alive who would lift a hand to help him.

This was the end. There would be no escape. A life that had outlasted centuries would end in agony and shame. Dismally. Hopelessly.

Feeding . . . something is feeding . . .

Kane clutched at his skull. Even through the pain of his mutilated face he could sense the icy tendrils pierce his brain, sucking energy from the agony of his tortured soul.

What was it . . . What had he done . . . He should not have fallen prisoner to Jarvo. There had been a hope of escape—desperate escape. It was so hard to think. Pain and despair dulled his mind. What had happened . . . A battle, Jarvo had said . . .

Kane remembered the battle. The chaos of blood, steel and flame as Jarvo's army stormed Ceddi and ended Orted's Dark Crusade in a wild night of violence and destruction. With fury Kane remembered the Prophet's treachery, his insane refusal to accept a truce after Kane's abortive *coup d'etat*, that had given the Combine its chance to rout the once invincible Sword of Sataki.

Kane remembered the last stand of his personal guard, trapped in the dying fortress between Orted's fanatical

troops and Jarvo's advancing army. As the last of his men fell, Kane had hewn his way to a moment's respite. And then? Kane remembered the black despair of that moment, when, reeling from exhaustion and a dozen wounds, he had realized he was cut off. There had been the old tower . . . Even in the desperate melee of battle, men had been loath to approach the chill stones of this ancient redoubt; those who guarded it now fled their posts before Jarvo's advance. Kane had fought his way to the tower, bolted the ancient door in the face of his pursuers.

Why . . . He had done so knowing the door would hold them only short minutes—that he would be cornered. Why had he chosen the tower to make his final stand? Kane struggled to think, to remember. He had sought the ancient tower in some last desperate hope. *Why? Why . . . the tower . . .*

The Tower of Yslsl—No! The *Lair* of Yslsl!

Yslsl!

Wizard of a lost age—or demon? Only the vaguest of legends remained. His black stone tower had stood here even before the first priests of Sataki had crept into Shapeli, so it was said. Or was it true, as some held, that Sataki and Yslsl were both brother demons in the pantheon of some forgotten elder race? But the cult of Sataki still lived—although for centuries it had all but perished—and to Yslsl there remained only tenuous myths. And his tower. Or, as the legends said, his two towers . . .

When Ceddi had been built from this benighted forestland, its first inhabitants had included the ancient tower within its log palisades. Though cold and menacing, its stones stood solid—and the city's founders had had more immediate dangers to face than foreboding legends. Generations later the tower yet stood—solid, cold and ill-famed as in the earliest days. Ceddi now had grander fortifications, and the old redoubt had been virtually abandoned.

There were *two* towers, so the legends held. One here, the other half a world away. And between the two towers dwelt Yslsl —the demon-wizard whose interdimensional

web was linked to this world through these two foci of energy. Perhaps his web touched other worlds as well . . .

One might enter the Lair of Yslsl, enter and cross through to where another strand of the web was anchored. There was a ritual that would open the portal, a spell known to eons-dead priests and to students of such lore. One might journey through this interdimensional corridor if one knew the spell. But to do so one must confront Yslsl . . .

Kane, whose knowledge of the occult spanned centuries, knew the spell—and the danger. But with his enemies breaking through the tower door, there had been no other chance.

And Kane remembered. Remembered chanting out the spell with breath in frothing gasps. The smash of the battering ram splintering the iron-bound door. The chill of his slashed flesh pressed to the black sunburst of stone set into the wall at the head of the spiral steps . . . The falling into blackness . . .

What had happened . . .

Jarvo said they had found him stretched senseless on the stones. Had his last desperate hope been only a fool's gamble with an ancient legend? Or was he even now enmeshed in the Lair of Yslsl—tortured by the illusions plucked from his mind by the vampiric demon?

It was so hard to think . . . Concentrate through the burning agony of his mutilated face, the dull pain of his wounds, the sapping lethargy of despair . . .

Lie here, Kane. It is hopeless. Lie here and let them come for you . . .

Yslsl!

The pain—it was real, too real. How could one feel pain if this were only illusion? And the nightmarish sequences he had lived before awakening in chains—there had been pain. Dreams, too? Delirium? Jarvo had said he had lain delirious.

Illusion! It was illusion. It *is* illusion! The corridor . . .

"Yslsl!" Kane screamed. His voice echoed eerily. "Yslsl!" Outside the cell he heard his guards stirring anxiously.

No! There is no cell! There are no chains! Yslsl, I entered your lair!

Fool—you fell senseless on the tower floor. In a moment your captors will lead you to your death.

Then rage burned through the cobwebby fetters of despair. Kane reeled to his feet, forcing his mind to clarity.

"Yslsl! Where are you!"

He must will himself from this illusion—must *believe* this was illusion—or he would die within the illusion, and Yslsl would feed upon the shrieking disintegration of his soul.

"Yslsl!"

Kane lurched forward, headlong for the iron-bound door. *Now. Now he must break the illusion!* There was no cell, no chains, no door . . . He flung himself for the door—looming huge, substantial, immovable . . .

He was in a corridor, his footsteps carrying him onward as in a dream, and behind him the corridor vanished into an abyss. No chains, no wounds. Illusion. It had been illusion . . .

Kane sensed baffled rage—and for an instant, awe. Then gloating—and hunger. Ravenous, gluttonous hunger.

"Yslsl!"

Laughter, deep laughter.

A shape moved toward him. A girl. Dancing nakedly toward him, long hair like starlight swirling about her supple form. Her face—beautiful, cruel as a goddess.

"Poor Kane," she sang like a child. "Poor Kane, he's quite insane."

"Who are you!" Kane demanded.

"Who are you?" she mocked. "Don't you know? Don't you know?"

"Yslsl?"

"Poor Kane. Poor mad Kane. Yslsl? Do you want Yslsl?"

"Are you Yslsl!"

"Perhaps *I* am. Perhaps *you* are. Do you want Yslsl?"

"Yes, damn you! Where is Yslsl!"

She laughed and pirouetted. Her starlight hair was a spinning nova. "Poor Kane, poor Kane. He's quite insane. Yslsl's in his brain. He feeds on your pain. And now you're insane. Poor Kane. *Why don't you die!*"

Kane grabbed for her. She darted away, but he caught her wrist. She spun against him, sinking her teeth into his hand.

Unendurable pain stabbed through him. Kane gasped and released her. The girl vanished in a snowfall of laughter-light.

Kane clutched his bitten hand, expecting to see blood. There was only a purple-green bruise, a swelling that grew as he watched. He shook with pain, as the swelling ballooned like an evil fungus—then burst.

And from the putrid abcess erupted not blood. Spiders. Tiny, black-green spiders crawled out of his flesh. Spiders bright and glittering as bits of glass. He felt their needle-point mandibles chewing free from his flesh. They crawled up his arm in a vein of bright-black chitin.

Kane screamed, tried to fling them off from his arm. The spiders hung on tenaciously, biting his clawing fingers. Lancinations of fire seethed through his envenomed flesh. The spiders were biting him as they crawled. Each bite burned into a purple-green swelling, a swelling that expanded and burst. And erupted with more spiders. To climb and bite . . . crawling for his face now . . .

Take a step back, Kane . . .

No! Behind him yawned the abyss. *This is illusion!*

The spiders were gone. His hand and arm were whole. Kane shuddered and plunged forward.

Laughter. Demonic laughter.

Goat-horned, toad-faced, the demon squatted in the mist ahead. A bloated dragon-toad, its scaled bulk utterly blocked the passageway. Its laughter roared deafeningly down the passage, and its mouth gaped ever wider—impossibly wider. An incredible length of sticky tongue snaked out toward Kane. In loathing Kane recoiled.

No! I can't step back!

Heels at the edge of the abyss, Kane forced himself to stand rigid, as the demon's tongue licked toward him. Now the creature's gaping toad-maw filled the entire passageway. Yellowed vomerine fangs stabbed from ceiling to floor like rotted stalactites and stalagmites. Foetid breath gushed forth from its gullet to sicken him. Kane swayed.

It wasn't a passageway at all. He was standing on the demon's foul tongue, gazing into its gigantic obscene maw. The passageway beyond was the creature's throat. He was walking into the leviathan's slobbering jaws . . . Horror and revulsion staggered him.

Run! Go back!

No! Yslsl, this is another illusion!

Go back! You'll be eaten!

Illusion!

Kane lurched forward from the advancing edge of the abyss. Down the slimy tongue, into the dripping jaws, into the yawning throat, where eyeless vermin crawled over his bare feet. The jaws began to close. Kane felt himself propelled downward into the demon's gullet.

"Illusion!" Kane roared. He charged blindly ahead, past the filth that swarmed over him.

He was in a passageway, and at his heels the edge of nothingness remorselessly followed.

"Of course this is illusion, Kane. You're insane."

Orted Ak-Ceddi grinned at him. "You're insane, Kane —can't you understand? Completely mad mad mad. This is all illusion—and so are you."

Kane lunged for him. The Prophet waited with a supercilious smile. Kane's powerful hands locked about Orted's thick neck.

It wasn't Orted. It was a girl, face contorted in fear. He knew her—Lyuba, whom he had loved. Lyuba, dead and dust for centuries . . . by his hand . . .

"Kane! Stop it!" Lyuba gasped, writhing in his grip.

But his hands would not let go. They closed of their own will, relentlessly. Kane tried to tear his hands away, but still his strangling grip tightened. Lyuba's beautiful face

purpled hideously. Her eyes burst from pressure. Her tongue protruded longer, longer . . .

It was a serpent's tongue. Kane held a serpent by its scaly throat. With a sudden twist, the scarlet serpent writhed free of his grasp, sank its fangs into his chest.

Kane yelled in pain, tore the fanged head from his chest. The serpent exploded into coruscant light, blinding him. Kane reeled backward . . .

No!

"Who is he?" The voices were suddenly all around. "What's the matter with him? Is he all right?"

The ballroom was filled with people, laughing and disporting themselves in swirls of jewels and costly robes over the obsidian floor. A number of faces were turned his way. Their expressions showed alarm.

"Are you all right?" asked a girl in a gown of strung pearls.

"Is something the matter?" her escort demanded. He wore an owl's mask.

"I . . . don't know," Kane heard himself say. Where was he? Did he know these people? What had he just done?

A pair of dancers blundered into him. "Watch it, old fellow," laughed one of them. "Had too much, have you?"

"What are you doing here, may I ask?" queried the consort of the pearl-dancer. "Are you one of the guests?"

Kane frowned. Was he? "I'm all right now."

"I think there's something wrong with him," someone suggested in a worried tone. "Who is he? Does anyone here know who he is?"

Who was he? Panic welled within him. Who was he? How had he gotten here? Kane couldn't remember anything beyond the last minute. He stared wildly about, seeking to escape. The dancers were calling for help.

Wait, some shred of memory. Yslsl . . .

"Stop it!" Kane screamed. The dancers halted and stared. "*Stop it*!" The ballroom shimmered.

It wasn't a ballroom. It was a dolmen. He lay on his back on a massive stone slab. Kane tried to move. He couldn't. His flesh was cold, rigid. His head was propped

upon something; his eyes were open and he could see his recumbent body.

His flesh was shrivelled, gnawed with age. Rusted mail and rotted furs enswathed his mouldering body. He had no breath to scream.

Figures were filing into the dolmen, gazing down at him. Dead things, whose decayed features he could recognize —enemies who had died at his hand in years past. Liches like himself. They filed around him, staring down, their rotted faces alight with secret mirth. They chanted a dirge.

"Poor Kane. He's quite insane."

"Poor Kane. He died in pain."

"Poor Kane. There's maggots in his brain."

Not maggots—something fouler . . . Yslsl.

Kane's frayed lips croaked a snarl: "Yslsl!"

Then there was nothingness. Kane, naked and alone, floated in the nothingness. Coldness, pain, nothingness.

His thoughts drifted, and his thoughts were pain. "Am I insane? Am I insane? Shouldn't I know something? Shouldn't I be somewhere? And where is here—and is it anywhere? And who am I—and am I anyone?

And cosmic horror wrenched at his soul—horror surpassing all that had haunted him. He did not know.

He did not know. Where. How. Why. When. Who. If. Ever. Who.

"Insane insane (Yslsl's eaten his brain) insane insane"

And fury burned bright in his crumbling soul.

"I am Kane!" he roared at nothingness. "I am Kane!"

And he was walking down a passageway. And at every faltering step the passageway vanished behind him.

"No. *I* am Kane."

Before him crouched a hulking, red-bearded man. His brutal face was twisted in anger, and the flames of death danced in his cold blue eyes. Kane thought he saw his own reflection—then saw the other figure move of his own accord.

"*I* am Kane," said Kane to Kane.

Kane's lips drew back in a snarl. "*Yslsl!*" And it was almost a prayer.

Kane lunged for Kane's throat. Kane sidestepped his rush—but Kane's lunge was a feint. Twisting as he attacked, Kane slashed his open hand at Kane's neck. Kane partially evaded the killing blow, at the same instant knocking Kane from his feet with a sudden twist of his leg.

Kane fought for balance, grappling with Kane as each struggled for hold. An elbow caught Kane in the face, smashing his nose and blinding him with pain. He swung his hip at the last instant, as Kane sought to follow his advantage—making Kane miss a second blow with his open fist.

Breath gusted from their throats in jarring sobs. Skin ripped from their bodies as steel-strong fingers clawed for grip. Each sudden feint, each covert hold was known to them both. Strength, speed were identical—the same as was the killing rage that hurled Kane against Kane in desperate hatred.

At the feet of the embattled twins awaited the abyss, inexorably following each struggling step of one combatant . . .

Slinging blood from his eyes, Kane broke Kane's strangling fingers from his throat with a crushing jab to the other's larynx. Coughing in agony, the other recoiled, his guard an instant too slow to deflect Kane's kick to his solar plexus. He slumped backward into the passage, scrambling to elude Kane's pressing attack. Kane bore into him, hammering a blow to his heart, to his face.

He staggered drunkenly on nerveless legs. Implacably Kane seized his throat, flung him around. The other butted his head into him with frantic strength, and Kane felt the edge of the abyss at his heels. Desperately Kane lunged sidewise and into the passage, suddenly flinging his opponent past him. Already plunging forward, the other could not check himself as the precipice glided closer. Arms flailing, he plummeted over the edge.

For an instant Kane saw something obscenely man-like, its face a mass of writhing translucent tendrils, clutching its taloned hands for the edge of the precipice. It clutched

only nothingness, and into nothingness it fell—a spinning, slowly diminishing mote among other motes that Kane saw were not really stars . . .

The passageway screamed with soundless horror; its outlines wavered. Fighting to keep his feet, Kane saw just ahead—what seemed to be an opening in its infinite length. Not daring to imagine where it might lead, Kane plunged through . . .

And in battle-flamed Ceddi, an ancient tower door splintered under the last blow of the ram; and vengeful Jarvo leaped past its wreckage—to stare in uncomprehending fury at an empty chamber of dust and echoes . . .

And half a world away, a ragged girl suddenly gasped and clutched her father's arm. "Father! There! At the top of the stairs! There's a man lying there!"

"What!" Her father followed her pointing finger in alarm. When the storm had forced them to seek shelter for the night in this ancient pile of stone, he had looked around the tower uneasily—for there were legends—and seen nothing untoward. Still, the wavering light of their fire was uncertain, and that last burst of lightning had been near enough to seem to set the tower aflame.

He called out, received no answer. Taking a brand from the fire, he climbed the spiral stairs cautiously, hand on the worn sword that was all that remained of his old estate. His daughter followed, more curious than fearful.

"Is he alive?"

"Yes, though badly wounded. A knight, by his gear. He's been in a desperate fight—robbers, perhaps. We'll bind his wounds as best we can."

Kane opened his eyes, looked at them, fell back into a stupor.

"Will he live?"

"By the look in his eyes, he will—to the ruin of whoever brought him to this."

The girl hugged her scrawny ribs. "I saw madness in his eyes."

Her father grunted. "I'll try to drag him down to our fire. Can you lift a little? He's a giant."

"What's on his hands?" She shuddered.

"Let me see." He lifted a bloody hand and swore, wondering at the crumbling fragments that clung to fingers and nails.

"Whatever he fought, it must have been dead a long time."

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